Red Gravel

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/53235049.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Categories:	M/M, F/F
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Alana Bloom/Margot Verger
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Freddie Lounds, Alana Bloom, Bedelia Du Maurier, Dr. Frederick Chilton, Mason Verger, Margot Verger
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Medieval, Romance, Enemies to Friends to Lovers, Hurt/Comfort, Fluff and Angst, Angst with a Happy Ending, Blood and Violence, Major Character Injury, Mostly historically accurate
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2024-01-23 Updated: 2024-03-01 Words: 36,376 Chapters: 17/27

Red Gravel

by SeahorseTrash

Summary

Sir William Graham was only celebrating a small victory with his fellow knights when he found himself fighting a strange man. That man, Hannibal Lecter, turned out to be the king, who he had never met due to his economic status. As atonement for this behavior, (rather than simply being killed) Will was to become Hannibal's personal servant and bodyguard. The two quickly abandon their feelings of hatred towards each other and exchange them for…something else. (There's also Alana/Margot in the second half but summarizing it includes MANY spoilers so just trust me)

Rated M for violence. Don't read if squeamish. Please don't be scared by tags. The Middle Ages were rough, but there is also fluff.

WITH CAMEOS BY: Beverly Katz, Jimmy Price, Brian Zeller, Francis Dolarhyde, Antony Dimmond, Cordell Doemling, Carlo Deogracias, Matteo Deogracias, Franklyn Froideveaux, Peter Bernadone, Clark Ingram, Jack Crawford

Notes

A/N CH1

This is set somewhere in between the high and late Middle Ages. I'm not assigning a specific decade or even century because I probably took information from 1200-1400. Not everything is dated properly on the internet, unfortunately. But let's be real, are you seriously that concerned with historical accuracy in your hannigram fanfiction? I am, so I'm attempting to include a miniature glossary/information sheet on each chapter if there are any terms or concepts that it's important to understand. Conveniently, there are none for Chapter One.

Also, I obviously changed a few things to make this story possible. Like, I greatly reduced the amount of homophobia these two would face at the time to a level more similar to current times. I also took most religious practice out of the equation because I'm not trying to write about them going to mass every day.

Also, I wrote this in 2021, so it's actually a time capsule that my friend convinced me to post! This first chapter is a little short, but I will post once a week :)

Enjoy.

He's The King, You Muttonhead!

It all started in a tavern. Just a regular old tavern, nothing special about it. It sat on the edge of the outer walls, right next to a small manor in which many of the outer wall knights resided. Tonight, they were celebrating the successful thwarting of a bite-sized invasion from the southwest. They picked off the enemies with ease, never needing to sound the trumpets of war.

Sir William Graham was amongst these men, slightly tipsy. His curly brown hair was damp with sweat and he no doubt had a bruise developing on his hip. He sat by himself, suffering from quite the headache. The other knights were just a little too much for him right now.

But of course a couple of them had to come over and grab him.

“Will, what’s got you sitting here all by yourself?” one asked. “We’re celebrating victory over there!”

“I can celebrate from a distance,” Will told them. “My head is killing me.”

“Did you hit it on the way down when that guy knocked you on your ass?” another knight teased. “Of course, you killed him for it.”

The cackling of his peers wasn’t enough to keep him from noticing a man staring at him. He had a swoop of ash hair and wore simple clothes. He did not turn away when Will caught him, which he found odd. He hesitantly walked over to him.

“Why are you staring at me?” he asked. The man did not take his eyes off of him.

“Does it bother you?” the man asked.

“Yes,” Will said. “Yes, it bothers me.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t like being watched,” he said, now agitated.

“Are you insecure?” the man asked. He didn’t give Will a chance to answer. “Do you fear that if someone looks long and hard enough, they will find what you are trying to hide? What is it that you’re hiding?”

“Stop it!” Will snapped. “You may think you know everything, but you don’t. You’re just guessing, aren’t you?”

“You are quick to anger,” the man said calmly. “Anger will earn you nothing but trouble. By the scabbard on your hip, I see that you are a knight. Anger will cloud your judgment on the battlefield, and it may cost you your life. Now tell me, why did you approach me?”

“Because you were staring at me like some kind of freak,” Will said. “Is this just what you like to do? Stare at people and try to guess what’s going on inside their heads?”

“Not all the time,” the man said, seemingly amused by Will’s frustration. This only made Will angrier

“Listen, I don’t care what you do in your free time,” Will spat. “Just leave me alone”

He turned to leave, tired of this man’s bullshit. His fists were clenched so tight, his fingernails dug into his palms.

“Leaving so soon?” the man asked, calling after him. “Things were just starting to get interesting.”

That was it. The straw that broke the camel’s back. The block that toppled the Jenga tower.

Will slowly turned around, glaring daggers at him.

“You want something interesting?” he asked.

“That would be ideal, yes,” the man said.

“The poor thing’s all wound up now,” one of the other men said. “What has he ever done to you?”

“Allow me to entertain this thought,” the man said, standing up.

A small crowd began to form, curious to see who would snap first. Most placed their bets on Will, including his own friends.

“Do you wish to cause me physical harm?” the man asked.

“You’re the one with all the answers,” Will said. “Why don’t you tell me?”

“I believe you are making a mistake,” the man said.”I do not wish to fight you. But if I must, I will not hold back.”

“You don’t have a chance,” Will said. “I killed three men today.”

“C’mon, Will, just let it go,” one of his friends shouted

“We’ve done enough fighting for one day,” yelled another.

But Will did not back down. He readied himself, fists clenched.

“You’re a fool, Sir,” the man said.

“Have you ever had your ass kicked by a fool?” Will asked.

“Can’t say I have,” the man said. “You’d be my first. Perhaps you could demonstrate for us how it is done.”

Will was exhausted. His body had already been through enough… but he wasn't going to let this guy win.

He took a deep breath before throwing the first punch.

He landed a solid right hook to the man's jaw, delighted to see him stumble backward. A roar of gasps and whispers erupted from the crowd. Regaining his balance, the man swung in return, bashing in his nose. Will could feel blood dripping down his face and into his mouth. Many in the crowd cringed at this devastating blow.

Will was angry before. Now he was pissed. He grabbed the man with red hands and threw him into a pillar where he knocked his head, sending him to the floor.

Will stepped back to catch his breath and admire his handiwork. People were shouting things, but he couldn't understand.

It was when he felt two men grab him, Will knew he had fucked up. He struggled to free himself as the other man was helped to his feet.

"Hey!" he shouted, thrashing around. "Let me go!"

"You really shouldn't have done that," the man said and he pulled himself to his feet. He reached into his pocket bag and pulled out a small knife. Will looked down at his own blade, but he was helpless. The man pressed the sharpened edge to his throat. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

Will didn't answer. He looked the man up and down. There were no indicators of nobility, nor profession. He wasn't wearing much more than a bloody tunic and stockings, but the quality of the cloth gave him away as more than a peasant. What was he doing outside the safety of those walls? Didn't he know that the outer ring was dangerous for those not already hardened by its harsh treatment?

"He's the king, you muttonhead!" someone shouted from the crowd. Will felt his heart drop all the way to hell as he met eyes with the one man who had the power to legally kill him. King Hannibal Lecter VIII. He immediately diverted his gaze to the floor.

"You're a knight," Hannibal said. "You of all people should recognize me. Maybe if you'd look me in the eye, you'd see it."

"You rarely travel past the inner walls," Will said, eyes clamped shut, fueling his trepidation. "How would I recognize a man I've never seen?"

"This one has an attitude," Lecter said to himself, lifting Will's chin. He looked Will up and down. "What shall be done about that?"

Will trembled as the cold steel broke the skin, a slow drip of blood traveling down his neck.

"I'm not afraid of you," Will said, though his voice shook.

"It seems that you are," Hannibal said. "Or do you tremble like this all the time?"

Hannibal laughed to himself before he pulled away his blade. Will bowed his head in relief.

“I am not going to kill you.” Lecter lifted his head with the knife under his chin. “Open your eyes.”

Will obeyed, his eyes fluttering open. Hannibal replaced his knife with a gentle hand. He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the blood from Will’s nose. Will flinched at his touch.

“Do you cower from the hand that feeds you?” the king asked.

Hannibal smiled as he admired the knight’s image. His eyes were a beautiful dusty teal in the dim light. He had a long raised scar running down his right cheek, another across his forehead that was obscured by his hair. His face glistened with sweat; he was afraid.

Hannibal knew exactly what to do with this one.

“Bring him back with us,” he ordered the two guards. “He will be useful.”

Will thrashed and kicked as he was cuffed and dragged out of the tavern. He could see concerned faces of his fellow knights in the crowd. Outside, he was thrown into the back of a wagon, not to be ignored by the king’s guards.

This was not going to end well.

A Fate Worse Than Death...

Chapter Notes

Okay so I lied about posting once a week. Since this is all fully written already, I'm gonna post like three times a week so this doesn't take forever :))

Onto real notes:

Something you will need to kunderstand throughout the story is mealtimes. Breakfast (if they ate it at all) was at “a very early hour”, I’m holding “lunch” at noon for convenience, and “dinner” was held around 3-4pm - before the sun sets. They were called different things, but I’m using our terms to avoid confusion. Sunset/sunrise times (and a lot of other things) are loosely based on the UK.

Quick vocabulary: The “high table” is exactly what it sounds like. It’s the head of the table where royalty sits, usually some level above everyone else in altitude.

The clang of the metal bars shook Will as his cell was slammed shut. He felt disoriented, still nursing that damn headache. It wasn’t made much better by the way they threw him down.

The floor was ice cold, despite it being the summer. Nevertheless, Will found himself laying there, hopeless.

He was either going to stay here for a very long time - possibly life - or he was to be executed the next morning. Both were equally terrifying.

He didn’t remember falling asleep, but a banging on the bars rattled him awake.

“Sir William Graham?,” he heard. He looked up to see two men, possibly the same two men who had dragged him here.

“His Majesty requests your presence,” one of them said.

“He has invited you to dinner,” said the other with a smirk.

They slowly unlocked his cell and opened it slightly, entering with those horrid cuffs. They restrained him and began walking out of the dungeon.

The dungeon was a long, daunting hallway. A baker’s dozen of small cells lined the wall, about half filled. It was underground, like a cellar, so there was only light from dying torches. The prisoners held here were pale, nearly translucent. They likely hadn’t seen the sun in months, if not years. Many of them were also frighteningly thin. Will guessed that the meals were not plentiful.

When they left the dungeon, Will was blinded by the sun. He had apparently slept until the next afternoon.

The guards walked him all the way to the other side of the grounds, entering through a small door that led to a long hallway. Not too far ahead, they stopped at a grand pair of double doors.

“Once we’re in there, we will uncuff you,” the guard to his left said.

“If you try anything, your head will be served for dinner,” said the one to his right.

Will was overwhelmed as they entered the great hall. It wasn’t massive, but it was ornate.

“I’m delighted to see that you’ve made it,” the king said behind him, seemingly appearing out of nowhere. He then addressed the guards. “You may remove his restraints. I will take things from here.”

Will felt his majesty’s hand on his back, flinching at his touch.

“I am not going to hurt you,” he said, leading Will over to a chair. “Sit.”

Will obliged. He was surprised when the king did not take his seat at the high table, instead choosing to sit across from him.

Something was different about him. Perhaps it was the change of attire. He was dressed far more extravagantly. Regardless, this was not the same man Will punched in that tavern.

It was an awkward few minutes before a servant brought out their food. It was a red meat with sweet potatoes and fruits. Will hadn’t eaten this substantial of a meal in quite some time. He found himself just staring at it.

“Go on,” Hannibal said. “Eat. I know you’re hungry.”

Will snapped out of his trance and picked up his food. He could feel Hannibal’s eyes on him as he took his first bite.

“How is it?” Hannibal inquired.

“What is this meat?” Will asked. It was unlike anything he’d ever eaten before. It was bright red in the center, but charred on the outside. It was so flavorful, Will found himself salivating as he thought about taking another bite.

“I never share our culinary secrets,” Lecter said. “If I told you, I’d have to kill you.”

Will wasn’t sure if he was meant to laugh at that.

“I jest,” Hannibal said. “You may be wondering why I’ve summoned you for dinner rather than some sort of punishment.”

“Did you want me to be well-fed when you executed me?” Will asked sarcastically. “Do you prefer hanging, burning, or beheading?”

“If there was such a thing as petty treason, you’ve committed it,” Hannibal said. “The penalty for that would not be death. Rather, punishment so cruel, you wish you were dead.”

Will swallowed a lump in his throat.

“How are you feeling?” Hannibal asked, as if he hadn’t just terrified the knight.

“Confused,” Will said. “I’m surprised I’m alive right now, to be perfectly honest with you.”

“I value honesty,” Hannibal said. “Will you tell me your name, Sir? I'm afraid we never properly introduced ourselves.”

“I was born William, but I go by Will,” Will said.

“Why?” Hannibal asked. “Do you not like the name your mother and father gave you?”

“It’s much easier to shout on the battlefield,” Will explained. “Less syllables.”

“Well, considering the fact that we are not on the battlefield, I will call you William,” Hannibal said. “Tell me, William, do you enjoy pain?”

“No,” Will said quickly.

“Then I will spare you,” Hannibal said. Will looked at him, confused.

“Why?” he asked. “Didn’t you just say I committed petty treason?”

“I see value in you,” Hannibal said. “You are useful.”

Will wasn’t sure if he liked those words. What was the king going to use him for? A human shield?

“In exchange for your conditional freedom, I would like for you to be my personal servant and bodyguard.”

Well, that answered his question.

“Why me?” Will asked.

“You’re strong, and a good fighter,” Hannibal said. “But also pleasing to the eye.”

Will felt his face grow hot. He tried to hide his blush, but it was no use. Hannibal smiled at him as he continued to eat his meal.

It seemed as though Hannibal wanted him to dwell on his words, as he didn’t speak again until they were finished.

“We really must do something about this attire,” he said. “Unfortunately your tunic is beyond saving, but we have some extra clothing that you can wear.”

With that, they stood and Hannibal led Will out of the great hall. The guards approached, but Hannibal stopped them.

“He is free now,” Hannibal said.

Free. Was he really? He was going to be the king’s butler-bodyguard for god knows how long. Sure, it beat punishment so cruel, you wish you were dead, but it still wasn’t freedom.

Hannibal led Will down the hall to a small bedroom. On the bed lay a few sets of clothes. It was nothing fancy, very similar to what he was wearing - minus the blood.

Of course, it didn’t seem like Hannibal planned on leaving the room while he changed, so he simply turned his back to him in an effort to find some privacy. Didn’t need the man staring again.

Nevertheless, he felt Hannibal’s eyes burn through his shoulder blades. What most likely drew his attention was a patch of cloth soaked through with now-dry blood.

“What happened to your shoulder?” he asked.

“An arrow,” Will said before quickly pulling on a tunic. “It’s fine now.”

“Have the dressing changed tonight before you go to bed,” Hannibal ordered. Will turned around and nodded.

When he was dressed, Hannibal straightened his collar with a smile.

“That’s much better,” he said. He then reached for a small bowl of water and a rag that sat at the bedside. “But we must do something about your face.”

He dampened the rag and began gently cleaning Will’s face.

“I must admit something to you, William,” Hannibal said. “You were very angry last night. Yet even in your violent and rude state, I couldn’t keep my eyes off of you. You possess great beauty. Do you know that?”

Will’s face grew hot as he felt Lecter’s hand on his cheek. It was soft and smooth, save for the faint callouses of a man who once wielded a blade.

“Do you believe me when I say it?” Hannibal asked. Will shook his head. “Why not?”

“People like you typically look down on those with many scars because it means they failed to defend themselves,” Will said. “They lost their battles.”

“What battle gave you this?” Hannibal asked, brushing his thumb over the scar that ran down Will’s cheek.

“An enemy knocked off my helmet and took a few swings,” Will said. “One slash across my face, then he went for the throat. I ducked and received another gash to the forehead.” He felt Hannibal push back his hair to reveal the scar.

“You think these scars make you ugly?” Hannibal asked

“They certainly take away from whatever beauty you see,” Will said.

“William, look at me,” Hannibal said. Will obliged, reluctantly making eye contact. “You may be the finest I’ve laid eyes on, with all of your imperfections. They are evidence of your strength and will to survive. It counters that of any man I’ve ever met.”

Will didn’t know what to say. So much had happened in the past 24 hours, he didn’t know what to make of anything. And once again, Lecter had purposefully let his words hang in the air, forcing Will to dwell on them.

No one had ever described him as beautiful. His mother had always said he was handsome, but he never believed her. All those women who stared at him…were they not judging him, but instead admiring him? Surely the king was just trying to get on his good side. If Will liked Hannibal, he’d be more inclined to obey his orders without protest.

Will’s train of thought crashed when Hannibal had finished cleaning him up.

“There,” he said, pulling the cloth away. “You’re more presentable. Now I have my first favor to ask.”

What could this ‘favor’ possibly be? Will didn’t even want to think of all the possibilities.

“I’d like for you to accompany me to the gardens,” Hannibal said.

It took every bit of strength for Will not to let out a sigh of relief. No labor or tedious tasks. One could argue that forcibly socializing with the king was just as bad, but Will felt strangely about him. He wasn’t quite as angry at him as he was before. He wasn’t sure if he enjoyed his company just yet, but he seemed to be on that path.

Hannibal helped him up and led him back down that long hallway until they reached a large archway that led to the outside. The gardens were beautiful, an arrangement of decorative shrubbery and flowering plants weaving through stone columns and archways. They sat on a small wooden bench by the stream. The sun was beginning to set off in the distance, casting darker tones of red and orange across the sky.

“I like to sit and watch the sunset,” Hannibal said, snapping Will out of his trance. “It gives me time to stop and think. What do you think about?”

“I try to make sense of what’s around me,” Will said. “I often find that the things that happen to me don’t fit into the timeline…until they do.”

“Where did you think your timeline was supposed to go last night?” Hannibal asked.

“Home,” Will said, eyes panning down to the gravel. “I thought I would return home a little drunk, go to bed, then wake up and go about my day as normal. But that didn’t happen.”

“You will miss your old life,” Hannibal said. “You’ll miss your old home and your friends, but those feelings will eventually go away. You will grow accustomed to life here.”

Was it true? Would Will learn to love these castle walls? Would his feelings towards the king change? Right now, he was still convinced that this was some kind of prank and he’d wake up in the dungeon tomorrow morning.

“What plagues you, William?” Hannibal asked. As Will looked up at him, it felt as though his eyes were boring a tunnel through his soul.

“I’m not entirely sure this is real,” Will said, quickly looking away again. “It shouldn’t be.”

“We often don’t believe in the gifts luck brings us,” Hannibal said. “You are lucky to be here. It feels strange because you don’t think you deserve it. But just as you fail to see your worth, you are ignorant to the reality of this situation. I chose you. That is all you need to know for now.”

The sliver of sunlight that peeked over the horizon cast a glow on them both as it dipped into the void.

The Gang's All Here

Darkness fell over the garden. They still sat at the bench.

“The dark can be frightening,” Hannibal said. “It provides a hiding place for all kinds of evil. Does it frighten you?”

Will thought of all the time he was forced to stand guard outside the walls in the pitch black night. The darkness truly was a hiding place for evil, but mostly wild animals that would attack him and the others from time to time.

He thought of fumbling around his home after returning very late. Lighting was expensive, so he chose to memorize the layout instead. However, sometimes a pot or stool would be out of place in his room and he’d make a fool of himself by tripping onto the ground.

He thought about how in the dark, no one could see him. No one could judge him.

“No,” he said. “I’m used to it. I quite like it, actually.”

“Why?” Hannibal asked.

“I don’t think you’ll like my answer,” Will said.

“Is it because you can hide in it?” Hannibal suggested. Will did not answer, but turned away. “I won’t allow you to hide anymore. Now that I have found you, you have no reason.”

If Will had a coin for every time Hannibal said something absolutely unhinged, he swore he’d be a rich man in no time.

“I’m sure you didn’t get much rest last night,” Hannibal said. “You really ought to go to bed. I’ll show you back.”

Hannibal stood and extended a hand. Will took it, expecting them to separate soon after, but that did not happen. Hannibal held his hand all the way to his bedroom, where he prepared the linens.

“It is not the most extravagant of beds, but it is much better than the stone floor of the dungeon, wouldn’t you say?”

“Definitely,” Will said as he sat down. It was much better than the bed he had at home too.

Home. He needed to stop referring to that place in such a way. This was supposed to be his home now, unbelievable as it was.

“What are you thinking about?” Hannibal asked.

“Could I possibly go get some of my old things?” Will asked. “I’d hate to lose the many sentimental items I once held.”

“Of course,” Hannibal said. “Tomorrow afternoon, we can visit your old dwelling to retrieve your belongings.”

“Will you once again don your disguise?” Will asked.

“Clearly it is an effective one,” Hannibal said. “With a little dirt on the cheek and grease in the hair, no one in that tavern recognized me. Only the guards’s presence gave me away.”

“Maybe they were too drunk,” Will suggested. Hannibal laughed.

“Well, I am not going to disturb you any further,” Hannibal said. “I’ll have someone come fetch you for breakfast tomorrow.”

With that, he was gone. Will pulled back the sheets and climbed into bed.

As he stared at the ceiling, he couldn’t help but think.

He thought about how Hannibal had forgiven him, even creating an arrangement in which they would spend more time together. He thought about the things he said about his scars, about how he was beautiful with or without them. He thought about how Hannibal chose him and what that could possibly mean.

It didn’t matter for now. He could figure out Hannibal’s complicated and strange motives later. For now, he just wanted to sleep.

—

Will awoke to a knock at the door. A woman stood at the threshold.

“Sorry to wake you,” she said. “It is time for breakfast.”

Will rolled out of bed and walked over to the wooden dresser. There lay a small handheld mirror. It hadn’t been there before. He knew this was Hannibal’s doing.

He appreciated the gesture, as now he could make sure he was presentable, which he arguably was not. His eyes were dull and tired, his nose bruised from the fight.

He tried his best to see himself the way Hannibal saw him, but he just couldn’t. The world had told him he was disfigured and unsightly - at least, that’s how he saw it. He still wasn’t sure about whether people stared in horror or awe.

He put the mirror down. Face down.

He didn’t want to be late, so he quickly made his way to the great hall. As he entered, he saw Hannibal sitting in the same place as yesterday’s supper, prompting him to sit across. He looked down to see a small plate of bread, fruit, and oats.

“How did you sleep?” Hannibal asked.

“I don’t remember it, so I guess I slept well,” Will said. “I sure do not look like it.”

“An improved diet and better rest will help over time,” Hannibal said. “I had nightmares as a child, so I seldom laid down to sleep. I’m told I looked like a ghost. But, as I grew older, those terrors occurred much less often, so I look alive.”

“Do you still get them now?” Will asked. He immediately realized it may have been an inappropriate question to ask at breakfast.

“Very rarely,” Hannibal said. “I am not as afraid of the world as I was as a child.” He paused for a moment. “What are you afraid of, William?”

Will was surprised by the question. He hadn’t expected to get this deep first thing in the morning.

What was he afraid of? He said the first thing that came to his mind, knowing that was the truth.

“Losing myself,” Will said. “Losing track of who I am or becoming something else entirely.”

Lecter said nothing.

“And spiders,” Will added.

“As you should be,” Hannibal said. “Their entrapment of flies is not much unlike how the Devil coerces us into a web of sin, only to drag us down to Hell.”

After that oddly specific remark, they finished their meal.

Hannibal had a meeting to attend, apparently one Will was not invited to. He sent him back to his room, where he once again stared at the ceiling for god knows how long. He didn’t think about much, but there was still one thing bothering him. It was the same thing that nearly kept him up the night before.

Hannibal had been acting strange ever since he got a good look at him in that tavern. Will had never gotten in a fight where the other guy caressed his face and wiped away the blood afterwards. That was not normal. And when he got to the castle, Hannibal didn’t treat him like a criminal. In fact, he felt more like a guest. Then, the endless praise. Why did Hannibal insist on reminding Will of his worth at every possible moment?

None of this was normal. Will’s mind flipped through the possibilities like it was trying to find the Bible verse that proved its point. Soon, he found it, and it terrified him.

Was Hannibal… flirting with him?

Surely not. He’d only known the man for a day. This wasn’t love. Will knew that. It could eventually turn into love, but it was only an infatuation, dare he say lust.

How was he supposed to meet him at lunch now?

—

Hannibal was stuck in meetings all day, secretive ones. So, Will was instructed to help around the castle. Every worker he assisted smiled at him in an odd way, the others whispering as he walked by. It was eerie.

When noon rolled around, Will couldn't stop glancing up at Hannibal during their meal. His mind was racing with no sight of the brakes.

"William, is there something on your mind?" Hannibal asked, as if he had read it. "You've barely touched your stew."

"You could say I'm a bit distracted," Will said.

"You must be looking forward to collecting your things," Hannibal said. "We will go after this. That is, if you are ready."

"I'm ready," Will assured him.

What did Hannibal think was going to happen?

Will chose not to dwell on it and simply finished his meal. Once they were both done, Hannibal led Will down a new hallway. They arrived at his bedroom. It was much larger, with a small sitting area opposite of the bed.

"You lived in the outer ring until now," Hannibal said. "Surely you can help me pick out the best disguise."

Will wasn't sure he wanted to partake in a style montage, but he was the king's servant. This was an order.

Hannibal pulled out a few plain tunics, all some shade of beige.

"These are usually what I wear if I'm trying to blend in," Hannibal said. "They look very similar, but there are a few details that distinguish them. I was hoping you could help me choose, as you may know what people look at in those areas."

Will studied the three tunics. They looked nearly identical, except for small details that were unnoticeable until you got close.

"As long as you keep your head down, any of them will do just fine," Will said. "So choose whichever is made of cheaper materials. If someone does happen to stop you, that is what they will notice."

"Then I will wear this one," Hannibal said, grabbing a wool garment. He quickly changed out of his more ornate clothing and into his peasant cosplay, not bothering to fix his hair afterwards. "Am I convincing?"

"Yes," Will said with a chuckle. He found himself smiling, something he hadn't done since he got there. He could see Hannibal smiling as well, as if he had achieved something.

“We must not waste any time,” Hannibal said. “I would hate for us to get caught after curfew.”

“They’re a bit lazy about that the farther out you go,” Will said. “But yes, it’s a good idea to get there and back before the sun sets. Things can get ugly in the dark out there.”

They set off on their journey with nothing but a large bag to carry Will’s belongings.

Once they left the inner walls, Hannibal seemed to be on edge.

“Do you know the safest route to your old home?” Hannibal asked.

“From here? No,” Will said as they walked down the dirt road. “But once we get to the square, I’ll know where we are. I lived at a manor with about twenty other knights. They’re probably wondering where I am. And they’ll definitely want to chat if they figure out who you are.”

“Well, being recognized by a knight is no concern to me,” Hannibal said. “It’s the common folk I am wary of. With so many eggs, some are bound to be rotten.”

Is that what Hannibal thought of them? Before he began his journey to become a knight, he was a peasant. He and his mother lived in a small house right up against the wall. They were more endangered by starvation than their neighbors, but there was the threat of small gangs or criminals hopping districts, looking for trouble.

“We won’t be encountering any rotten eggs,” Will said semi-confidently.

They continued down the path, passing merchants and houses. Hannibal noticed that the farther they went, the fewer resources there were. The people on the street grew thinner and thinner as they walked, a sign that food was not evenly distributed.

When they finally reached the manor, Will was greeted by a group of knights. They paused their training and rushed to him.

“Will! What happened to you?” one asked.

“We thought you were thrown in the dungeon for good,” another said. “Nearly started auctioning off your stuff.”

“I was ready to bust you out of there,” said a third.

“It’s a long story that I unfortunately don’t have time to tell,” Will said, birthing protest from the knights. “I’m here to collect some of my things, then I go back to the castle.”

“The castle?” said a voice from behind the group. They parted to reveal Sir Franklyn Froideveaux, the nosiest of the lot. No one knew why, but he was absolutely obsessed with the crown. And cheese. “What are you doing at the castle?”

Will looked at Hannibal, who simply looked back at him before speaking.

“He is my servant now,” he said. Franklyn’s eyes widened.

“Are you…?” He trailed off, unable to finish his question out of excitement.

“Yes,” Hannibal said.

A few of the knights grabbed Franklyn to hold him back as a cautionary measure.

“It is an honor to meet you, Your Majesty!” he said, bowing over and over like that one move in the club penguin dance.

“We would like to continue with our mission now,” Hannibal said, completely ignoring him.

The knights parted to let them into their living quarters. Will’s room was at the back. All of his things had stayed put, thankfully.

“Your friends behave more like jesters rather than knights,” Hannibal said. “They have quite the sense of humor. I remember hearing you all constantly laughing the night we met.”

“Joking around helps lighten things up,” Will said. “It can get pretty dark at times. People get injured. Or die. We have to cope somehow.”

There was a silence as the reality of life outside the castle continued to dawn on Hannibal. He looked over at Will, who had begun to pack some of his clothes. Had he really lived this way his whole life? The room was cramped and cluttered even with the very few things Will owned. There was a narrow bed on one wall and a small desk on the other. In the corner, there was a pile of busted plate armor. The only light source was a small window above the desk and a broken-looking lantern. He was glad Will was living in better conditions now.

Before he knew it, Will had finished packing. The bag didn’t look very full, but Hannibal understood that Will did not own much.

They said their goodbyes and began their journey back to the castle. As they walked, Hannibal looked over at Will. He seemed to be in a good mood, which is something Hannibal had not yet witnessed. His face was lifted and bright rather than tired and sad.

But that face was soon taken over by fear.

“Oh no,” Will said under his breath as he stopped in his tracks.

“What’s wrong?” Hannibal asked.

“Hold this,” Will said, handing Hannibal the bag.

The Girls Are Fighting

Chapter Notes

This one is short, but it's very eventful!

"Will Graham," said Francis Dolarhyde, the one person he didn't want to run into. "Do you have my coin?"

Will did not have his coin. He owed Francis quite a bit of money, but he'd been stalling on the payment. By the look on his face, the collector wasn't going to wait this time.

"I'll take your silence as a 'no'," Francis said, stepping closer to Will just to make him uncomfortable. He then turned to Hannibal. "Who's your friend?"

"He's none of your business," Will said, suddenly finding himself very protective of Hannibal.

Francis took a few steps towards Hannibal and Will shoved him away. Big mistake. Francis threw a heavy punch at Will's stomach, sending him tumbling backwards. Hannibal caught him as he tried to recover.

"You won't win a fight against me, Graham," Francis said. "Especially not by relying on your friend to catch you when you fall." He paused for a moment, eyeing Hannibal. "He'd probably bruise so easily."

Will parted from Hannibal and charged at Francis, throwing a punch at his jaw. When he made contact, Francis stumbled a bit, but stayed on his feet. He delivered another devastating body shot, this time much harder. Will fell back, his head slamming down on the ground.

"You're much weaker than last time," Francis said, laughing. He slammed his foot down on Will's knee, ensuring that he could make no swift escape. "Stay here. I want to talk to your friend."

Disoriented, Will could just barely make out the image of Francis walking towards Hannibal. Every attempt to stand was met with a wave of pain. After what felt like a dozen tries, he was able to drag himself to a merchant's table and use it to pull himself to his feet. As he looked up, he saw Francis grab Hannibal by the collar and toss him into a stack of hay bales, nearly burying him.

Will focused his energy on Francis, who was laughing away. He limped over and grabbed his head, slamming it down on a table. Franics fell to the ground, nursing his forehead. Will reckoned he was finished, so he hobbled over to where Hannibal had begun digging himself

out. Will grabbed both his arms and pulled him to his feet. Hannibal dusted the hay off of himself before Will grabbed his arm and began making their great escape.

They ran - and hopped - through the streets, never letting go. Will felt like he was slowing them down. Every bend of his knee hurt, but he knew that his job to protect Hannibal was more important than his comfort. If there was anything he learned as a knight, it was sticking to your duty, even if it means getting your knee curb stomped.

When he felt they were far enough away, Will stopped and laid on the ground. Even after such a brief fight, his whole body ached. Francis was stronger than the last time they collided. He hoped to never see him again.

“That was one rotten egg,” Hannibal said, sitting down next to him. “Are you injured?”

“Not badly,” Will said, though his ribs were tender and his knee cracked with every move. He slowly sat up and stood with Hannibal’s help. “If I had my sword, that would’ve ended a lot sooner.”

“I will return your sword when necessary,” Hannibal said as they began walking again. “Murder is not the answer to petty conflicts like this.”

Their journey back was uneventful from that point onward. By the time they arrived at the castle, Will was exhausted. Every step was a burden. Hannibal must have sensed this, as he wrapped an arm around him to offer support as they made their way down the long hallway to Will’s room.

“You did well today,” Hannibal said as they both sat down on the bed, the bag in between them. “A true test of obedience, to protect me without an order to do so.”

“I’m a knight,” he said. “It’s in my nature to fight on behalf of others. You’re no exception.”

“It’s interesting to see it from the perspective of a bystander rather than an opponent,” Hannibal said. “You’re very strong, though you tend to start off too hot. You must preserve your flame so that you can properly burn them in the end.”

Will thought of how he had felt just moments before the fight, how it felt like a fire had been lit inside him. He hadn’t felt like that in a long time. It could only be the distinction between fighting for duty, for his kingdom; or fighting for passion, people and causes he cared about.

“Hopefully, you will not have to fight often,” Hannibal said. He then stood. “You must rest now. Meet me in the gardens at sunset.”

Will watched him go. When he was gone, Will placed his bag on the ground and practically fell into bed.

Hannibal may have been proud of him, but Will felt his performance was inferior. He shouldn’t have given Francis such access to soft areas like his stomach. Then again, his leg wasn’t safe either. His guard was down in general, and that was bad.

Was it because he was with Hannibal? They had decent fun on their excursion before the encounter. But that protective instinct that kicked in… He felt that it sent him into a blind rage rather than his usual calculative state.

Was this at all influenced by his theory that Hannibal was flirting with him? Perhaps this was the reason he felt so protective of him. Knowing that the king possibly had feelings for him made him feel strange, and he wasn't sure if he liked it or not. He was still somewhat confused about this whole situation and today wasn't helping.

Instead of thinking further, he chose to fall asleep.

-

Will awoke to the sight of bright red and orange out his window. Realizing he was late, he shot up and got out of bed, being careful not to put too much pressure on his leg. He hobbled down the long hallway, remembering the direction Hannibal had taken him before.

He found Hannibal sitting on the bench, facing the sun. He turned as Will sat next to him. They stayed there in silence for a moment before Hannibal spoke.

"Imagine you are walking down a long road," he said. "You are told that you will eventually reach a destination. After a while, you arrive at a fork in the road. On one side, the pathway remains the way it was. On the other, you sense a difference. It is not obvious to the eye, but rather a feeling you get. You are unsure where this road will lead, but it is alluring. Do you take it?"

"Will I still reach my destination?" Will asked.

"Perhaps," Hannibal said.

"I prefer to stay where I know it is safe," Will said. "Although, I can vividly see myself being dragged down the unfamiliar path against my will." He shot Hannibal a look.

"You are resistant to change," Hannibal said. "But you seem to have accepted the situation you are currently in."

"I think the reality just hasn't hit me yet," Will said.

"I hope that you will fully adjust to life here," Hannibal said. "I would like for you to enjoy it."

"How am I supposed to enjoy being torn away from everything I've ever known?" Will asked, frustrated. "I don't think you realize how much I'm leaving behind."

"I've seen your old living conditions," Hannibal said. "I've seen the cramped, filthy spaces and the hostile people-"

"You spend one day in town and think you understand how everything works," Will scoffed. "Someone like you would never understand. Yes, it was cramped and filthy. Yes, I had to

look over my shoulder now and then. But that was my home. I will likely never see any of my friends again."

"You chose the path that led you to my dungeon," Hannibal said.

"You could've just killed me," Will muttered, standing to leave. He felt Hannibal grab his arm.

"I would not like for this conversation to end this way," he said. "But if you must leave, allow me to escort you, as you are injured."

Will reluctantly let Hannibal silently walk him to his room, where he immediately went to bed.

He dreamt of his old life, of sitting around a fire with his fellow knights and joking around. It was as if his mind was teasing him, showing him something he could never have again. And it promptly took it away, the knights melting where they sat. The liquid flowed past him, turning into the clear water of the stream in the gardens. He sat on the bench, averting his gaze as Hannibal joined him. Morning came, and they still sat on that bench, refusing to look at each other. Will simply sat and stared into the sun.

—

Hannibal lay on his bed, sleepless. He couldn't stop thinking about his argument with Will. What had he done wrong?

He feared that Will would not be able to adjust to his new life. It saddened him to know that he was feeling homesick. He wondered what he could do to improve things, to repair their relationship after this fight.

If Will grew to despise him, he would be heartbroken. In the short time he had known him, he felt a strong connection, like he was destined to meet him.

Though his looks were what caught Hannibal's eye at first, it was so much more than that. He admired how he could participate in deeper discussions and share his feelings without shame. Many men were afraid to be vulnerable, but not him, and he loved that.

He had been wrestling with this truth ever since their first dinner, but Hannibal couldn't deny it now.

He was falling in love with Will.

Storytime (Not Clickbait)

Will awoke more naturally that morning. No one came to fetch him, which likely meant he was up early.

The sun shining through his window was blinding from where he sat, so he was forced to get out of bed. He walked over to look out at what lay within the inner walls. A few people were already walking around, but the streets were largely empty.

He thought about how easy it would be to run through those empty streets and return to the place he called home. There, everyone woke up early to work, whether it be in the fields or in a workshop. He missed the morning noise.

Still somewhat angry with Hannibal, he didn't want to attend breakfast, but he knew that skipping meals would only make his relationship with the king worse.

When the same woman from the day before called for him from the doorway, he put on his shoes and began making his way to the great hall. He was early, so he sat at his place alone for a moment.

This peace was short-lived as Hannibal entered. It was quiet for a moment, but then he spoke.

"Were you planning on just glaring at me all day or will we address what happened last night?" he asked.

"The former is less effort," Will said, avoiding Hannibal's eyes all together.

"How do you feel," Hannibal asked.

"I don't know," Will said.

"How is your leg?" Hannibal asked.

"It's fine," Will said.

This was not the ideal level of conversation either of them wished to engage in, but both were too stubborn to concede to the other. This continued back and forth until they had finished breakfast, discussing sleep, weather, and the food. Anything except the elephant in the room.

They went about their day wondering who would crack first. The castle staff put their money on Will.

It was nearly sunset before the results were in.

They sat in the gardens as usual, waiting for the sky to glow with red, orange, and yellow hues.

"Reality has hit me," Will said.

“In what way?” Hannibal asked.

“You said I’m resistant to change,” Will said. “But it seemed as though in spite of this, I have accepted the situation I’m currently in. I said it was because reality hadn’t hit me yet. It’s hit me now.”

“What is this reality?” Hannibal asked.

“You and I are very different,” Will began. “This was made clear by your reaction to my way of life, the people and places I called home. You grew up in a castle. I was born into poverty. We are not the same.”

“I am aware that you and I grew up in different classes, but I have tried my best to give you a comfortable life here,” Hannibal said. “You may only be my servant by title, but I’d prefer to call you a companion. A friend.”

Will simply let head fall into his hands, defeated. He didn’t know what to do, what to say. He didn’t understand this man.

“A lot has happened to you in the past few days,” Hannibal said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “One day you were battling a small invasion, then celebrating your win at a tavern. By nightfall, you found yourself in the dungeon. I’m told you slept through most of the next day. But then they brought you to me and we shared supper. You joined me at sunset before resting on a new bed. The next day, we visited your old home and you were able to see your fellow knights. On our way back, however, you saw someone who was not so friendly. You fought, sustaining minor injuries that still hurt you today, I reckon. That night, you were quite angry with me.”

What was the point of this recap? Will remembered everything as if it had just happened. He didn’t need Hannibal to remind him.

“All these events can become overwhelming,” Hannibal said. “That feeling can make us say and do things we regret.”

“I don’t regret anything,” Will said. “You needed to hear the truth. People of your status don’t understand what it’s like to live out there.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it?” Hannibal suggested. “Maybe then I can understand.”

Will gave Hannibal the look of do I have to? He wasn’t in the mood to tell his life story, but he had a feeling Hannibal wouldn’t take “no” for an answer.

“Growing up, I lived with my mother,” Will began. “I worked the fields as soon as I was able, bringing in as much money as I could. She was a spinner, but she had a bad back, so she couldn’t work as much. We were lucky to afford a small wattle and daub house with some money left by my father, though the thatched roof constantly needed repairs.”

“What happened to your father?” Hannibal asked.

“He fell ill and died before I could remember,” Will said. “I’m told he was a cobbler.”

“Is your mother still alive?” Hannibal asked.

“No,” Will said, bowing his head. “I lost her at a young age. I don’t go one day without thinking about what happened to her. She always did the best with what we had, and made my early childhood as enjoyable as it could be in our circumstances.”

“May I ask how she died?”

“I had a feeling you would,” Will sighed. “We lived right up against the outer wall to the south, so when the kingdom faced that massive invasion thirty years ago, our house was one of the first to be pillaged. She tried to protect our chest, as it held sentimental items from my father in it, but they killed her for it, assuming there were valuables.”

“Where were you?” Hannibal asked.

“Under the bed,” Will said. “We heard the racket outside and she told me to hide. Shortly after she died, I saw the soldier’s body fall as well. A knight had killed him. Just before he left, I crawled out from my hiding place. I knew I could trust this man because he was on our side. He wasn’t sure what to do with me, a seven year old little peasant boy with no parents. I told him I wanted to be like him, to protect people from the ‘bad guys.’ He took me in as a page. When I wasn’t completing a task, I trained whenever I could. I practiced with the others with wooden swords and shields. I learned to ride a horse with a lance. When I became a squire, we began to train with real weapons and the knight taught different fighting skills. We joined him on the battlefield. Many of the others were scared, but I wasn’t. I was often injured, but I always kept fighting. That is how I earned my knighthood.”

“You are certainly very brave,” Hannibal said. “What happened to you in your early life is unfortunate, but you came out of it much stronger.”

“Many people have told me that,” Will said. “I’m not sure if I believe any of them”

“It is true,” Hannibal assured him. “You are a force to be reckoned with, William. Not only are you strong and skilled, but you are also stubborn as a mule. You will never give up. Even now, you are struggling to stay angry with me.”

He was right, and that frustrated Will to no end. He felt as though Lecter had a window straight into his soul. He wished he could close the curtains.

“Why are you trying to get so close to me?” Will asked. “You shouldn’t care about me. You shouldn’t see me as a friend.”

Hannibal smiled.

He never got his answer, for Hannibal stood and gestured for him to follow. He didn’t lead him to his room. Instead, he went in another direction, taking him to an oddly-placed bookshelf. He moved the shelf with ease, revealing a narrow wooden door.

“Vulnerability is generally frowned upon.” Hannibal said. “But to me, it is valuable. You have shared with me. Now I am going to share with you.”

Will had no response, for he was too curious.

“This door is my greatest kept secret,” Hannibal said. “Behind it is a passageway that leads directly to the gardens. I believe it was originally part of an escape route composed of these tunnels. I use it more often than you’d think. Whenever I need to get away from the busy world, I sneak through here so that no one can follow me. I’ve never shown it to anyone before.”

Hannibal opened the door to reveal a narrow passageway, Will could see no end, but that may have been because the gardens were in a diagonal direction from their current location. The tunnel would have to make a turn.

“Unfortunately, it is too dark to show you the other side,” Hannibal said. “But perhaps tomorrow I’ll point it out to you while we sit. For now, it is getting late. We must be going to bed soon.”

Hannibal walked with Will to his room before his own, as usual, leaving Will to lie awake and think.

Hannibal was right. He was struggling to stay angry with him. So he decided not to be.

In reality, Will should’ve expected that a king would be clueless about how his poorer subjects live. He never had much luck fighting with reality. There were certain things he was just going to have to accept, whether he liked it or not.

He would have to accept things that angered him, but also things that confused him.

There was no doubt in his mind now that Hannibal had an interest in him. He had to accept what that might mean for his future. Would Hannibal pursue him? Or would it just be this unspoken truth that made everything awkward? Will hoped answers would come soon. Otherwise, he’d have to go out and find them, which wasn’t ideal. Hannibal wasn’t exactly an open book. He was more like one of those diaries with the tiny padlock.

Maybe it just took time. Maybe he was just following the advice he gave Will after his fight with Francis. He was preserving his flame.

Will got out of bed and walked to his window, where he looked out upon the rich folk. There were a few torches still lit. He could see a few people heading home. They all looked like they lived comfortable, peaceful lives.

He wondered what they thought about. What were their worries? Will seemed to be worried about everything those days. He wished he could just turn his brain off. Then it would finally stop trying to sell him on Hannibal like he was a multi-level marketing scheme. He wasn’t buying.

He still didn’t know if he could fully trust Hannibal. What if he used all the information Will had given that day against him? He didn’t want to think about it. He wanted to sleep.

After a successful rumination session, Will made his way back to bed. He tossed and turned all night, finally succumbing to sleep at some ungodly hour.

No dreams this time. Good.

The Girls Are Fighting (Part Two)

Will awoke feeling quite unrested, but he trudged to the great hall anyway.

“Good morning, William,” Hannibal greeted him as he sat down. “You seem tired. What kept you up?”

“I just couldn’t find a comfortable position,” Will lied.

“Shame,” Hannibal said. “I had plans for today, but if you are not rested, that could create problems.”

“I am perfectly able,” Will said.

“I will hold you to that,” Hannibal said. “William, no longer being on a knight’s schedule does not exempt you from upholding the expectations of a knight.”

What did he mean by that?

“You must stay in peak fighting condition,” he continued. “Which is why today, you will be training.”

Will tried his best to suppress a laugh. He failed.

“What am I going to fight?” he asked. “A tree?”

“Close,” Hannibal said. “You and I will spar, surrounded by trees.”

“How familiar are you with the area?” Will asked. “Do you have all your moves planned out?”

“You may select the spot,” Hannibal said with a slight smile. “As soon as we are finished with breakfast, we will be on our way.”

For once, Will was actually kind of excited to hang out with Hannibal.

—

They walked slowly through a lush forest, Will keeping an eye out for the perfect arena.

“Here,” he said, suddenly stopping in a small clearing.

“What’s so special about this place?” Hannibal asked.

“I’m just a fan of oak,” Will said, pulling the wooden sword from his belt. Hannibal raised his sword as well.

Without warning, Hannibal swung at Will, who dodged the attack. Will retaliated, aiming low, but Hannibal managed to block. They continued this game of turns for a while before Will said fuck it and charged, giving Hannibal much less room to breathe.

“Remember what I told you, William,” Hannibal said as they held in a cross for a moment.

The flame.

Will knew he needed to save his energy, but he was determined to extinguish Hannibal’s flame before it had the chance to grow. He didn’t know what he was capable of. He had to win early.

He took a step back before landing a kick to Hannibal’s side, sending him to the ground. Once he was down, he placed his foot on the wrist of his sword hand.

“Impressive,” Hannibal said. “Reset.”

They fought again, then again, and again. Will had won every match, but as he stepped back to catch his breath, he knew Hannibal had a trick up his sleeve.

“Are you ready?” Hannibal asked. Will simply nodded.

Everything was the same until Will went in for the kill. Suddenly, Hannibal expertly parried, challenging Will to a battle of true swordsmanship. Their swords almost looked tangled as they crossed over and over again. Will could feel himself growing tired. His arms burned with exhaustion.

It felt as though he blinked and was all of a sudden falling, a sharp pain in his lower right leg.

When he opened his eyes, he realized that Hannibal’s sword had swept the ground with him. A low strike, something he should’ve seen coming.

“Good one,” Will said, breathing hard. The last thing he wanted to do was get up.

“Are you surrendering?” Hannibal asked.

“I don’t give up, remember?” Will slowly pulled himself to his feet.

“There is no shame in quitting while you still have some of your dignity,” Hannibal said with a smile before making his next move.

As their swords clashed once more, a clap of thunder roared through the forest. Soon, rain began to seep through the thick canopy of trees. But the men did not stop fighting. With every swing and strike, their swords met each other with a dull clank.

Will backed away for a moment to get some air, but Hannibal followed. Everywhere he went, Hannibal followed. He zig-zagged across the clearing, he was followed. He ducked behind a tree, he was followed. He climbed up a tree and Hannibal would stand at the bottom, waiting. It was a game of cat & mouse for the history books.

“You cannot stay up there forever,” Hannibal said.

“I will try my best,” Will teased. He stood on a branch about eight feet off the ground, just out of reach of Hannibal’s sword. Cocky as he was, he shifted his feet on the slick branch and suddenly felt them fly out from underneath him. He was lucky to catch himself, especially with his left hand. He dangled for a moment before dropping down safely.

“Was that your best?” Hannibal asked.

This angered Will, causing him to charge at Hannibal, bringing his sword down hard. It was parried, but the move reminded Hannibal of who he’s messing with, as the kids say.

However, this hubris would cost him.

As he made his next wild swing, he felt Hannibal’s sword crack down on his wrist, causing him to drop his sword. He was then dragged by the collar and shoved into a tree, his head slamming against the bark. Hannibal had him pinned by his chest, sword at his throat.

“Are you ready to give up now?” Hannibal asked.

Will assessed the situation. Things were not looking good for him. His heart was racing, his breathing heavy. He couldn’t hear his own thoughts over the pouring rain. His whole body hurt. He could barely move out of a combination of pain and fear. He knew this wooden sword couldn’t kill him, but it felt too real.

Hannibal was so close, Will could see his own reflection in his pupils. He turned his head to avoid them, but Hannibal grabbed his chin and turned him right back.

“Your stubbornness will kill you, William,” he said. “You must know when your time is through.”

He then released Will from their position. Will took a deep breath, as if he had been holding it.

“You didn't have to hit me that hard,” Will said, cradling his wrist. Pain radiated from where Hannibal’s sword had made contact.

“Are you hurt?” Hannibal asked, approaching him with concern.

“It’s not broken or anything,” Will said quickly. “But it’s going to leave a mark.”

“I ask you if you are hurt and you tell me whether or not you are injured,” Hannibal noted. “Typical behavior amongst knights. They teach you to hide pain, to keep fighting. It’s not healthy.”

“I’m fine, really,” Will said, picking up his sword. It stung, but it wasn’t unbearable. “And they don’t teach us. We just learn.”

“Then you must unlearn,” Hannibal said as he began to lead him out of the forest.

They walked through the trees, paying close attention to the landmarks they had passed on the way there. The rain continued to drench them from head to toe. They saw small wildlife fleeing from the storm. The occasional acorn would fall on their heads. Everything was normal.

Until it wasn't.

"Stop," Will said, grabbing his shoulder. He then pointed to their right. "Look."

No more than twenty feet away, a large creature slowly walked in their direction.

"What is it?" Hannibal asked. He was curious, but something inside him told him to be afraid.

"A wolf," Will said quietly as he began backing them away from it.

"I've never seen a wolf," Hannibal said. "Its size is impressive."

"I've only seen one in my lifetime," Will said. "It must've been young, as it was easily half this size. Teeth were just as sharp though. There's an old fireside tale of a man who was torn to pieces by wolves. Caution against venturing into the woods alone. I never believed how big they could get. But now…"

When the wolf caught sight of them, its ears stood straight up and its fur bristled. Its lips curled to reveal sharp incisors. A low growl shook them to their core.

"We must've taken a wrong turn," Will said, fear in his voice. "It's angry because we're in its territory."

"Then let's evacuate its territory," Hannibal said, grabbing Will's arm and beginning to sneak away. This turned into a full sprint when they glanced behind to see the wolf running towards them.

A clap of thunder reminded them that the forest floor was working against them. Not only were there protruding roots to hop over, but there was also slick mud that slowed them down greatly.

The mud was so slick, in fact, that Will's shoes lost traction and he fell right into it, pulling Hannibal down with him. The wolf was right on their tail, pouncing on top of Will. He acted fast, shoving his wooden sword into its jaws. It pushed back with great strength, so strong that it threatened to break his sword.

Hannibal's heart sank when he heard a shout and the snarling of the wolf behind him. He sat up and turned to see Will underneath it.

"Hannibal!" Will cried.

An intense protective instinct took over him. He scrambled to his feet and charged at the wolf as fast as he could in these conditions, shoving it off with all his might. It rolled down the hill and ran away.

Hannibal turned to Will, who now lay beneath him. He looked exhausted. His face and arms were caked with mud, his hair lay flat and tangled. Even in this state, Hannibal found him to be beautiful. His eyes, half shut, Will looked up at Hannibal.

“It’s gone,” he said, voice hoarse. The wolf’s weight on his chest had been suffocating. It felt good to finally breathe. Now he wanted to get out of here. “I want to go home.”

Home. They were both surprised he had said that word.

“We're going home,” Hannibal said as he got up. He pulled Will to his feet and they began walking again, Will holding on for support. As they reached the edge of the forest, the rain ceased.

One perk of being king is that you are never late for dinner. Dinner waits for you. Dinner waits for you to change clothes and wash off the outdoors. It even waits for you to check in on your servant with whom you are madly in love with.

Hannibal entered the room to find Will inspecting himself in the mirror. His chest was red where the wolf’s paws had pressed down, bloody punctures from its claws.

“William, are you alright?” Hannibal asked. Will whipped around, startled. “Do you need help?”

“I was just surveying the damage,” Will said, placing the mirror back on his dresser.

“We must be on our way to the dining hall,” Hannibal said, handing him a fresh tunic. “I’ll give you a moment to get dressed.”

They ate in relative silence, for both of them were very tired. Will would catch Hannibal’s glances, as he found himself looking up at him in turn. Something about the events of that day changed him. He saw Hannibal’s strength used to harm, then to protect. It fascinated him, but he was also grateful. He didn’t want to think about what could’ve happened if Hannibal hadn’t been there when the wolf attacked.

“William, this may sound strange considering the events of this day,” Hannibal said towards the end of the meal, “but I would love to spar with you again.”

“Let’s try a different location next time,” Will said with a quiet laugh.

“Indeed,” Hannibal agreed. “Would you feel well enough to sit with me?”

“I-“

“Remember, do not hide your pain,” Hannibal interrupted before Will could answer.

Will thought about it. His whole body ached from sparring. His wrist was very sore, already beginning to bruise. He still hadn’t quite caught his breath after the wolf incident. He wasn’t sure if he could consider himself well.

“No,” he said, bowing his head.

“Then let me walk you to your room,” Hannibal said as he stood. He wrapped an arm around Will as they walked. He even tucked him into bed before sitting on the edge. “You did well today. Though I showed restraint in our first few matches, you still gave me a challenge in the end. I always enjoy a challenge.”

“You kicked my ass,” Wil said with a laugh, then a cough.

“Before that,” Hannibal specified. “Even in our final duel, you performed impressively until the very end.”

Will smiled, recognizing this as an attempt at flattery. It was successful, but he recognized it.

“Before I go,” Hannibal said. ”Today, you referred to me by my name.”

Will froze. Had he?

Shit. In the woods, under the weight of a drooling beast. His judgment had been impaired, but that didn’t matter. This was probably another act of petty treason. Hannibal would have him sent to the dungeon first thing in the morning.

“You are free to call me whatever you’d like,” Hannibal said with a slight smile. “It’s refreshing to hear my own name.”

With that, he left. Will watched him go, confused, but accepting.

As he lay in bed Will found himself once again thinking about Hannibal, but this time was different. He wasn’t crafting theories on whether or not Hannibal had feelings for him. No, this time it was about Will’s feelings.

Hannibal likely saved his life. He wasn’t sure how to repay him, for the last time he was rescued was when he was seven years old and this was very different. Maybe it bothered him because he felt as though he was supposed to be the knight in shining armor. He was the bodyguard, the protector. And yet, Hannibal saved him. He was simultaneously humbled and frustrated. He didn’t like the way Hannibal made him feel.

The Bimbofication of Will Graham (Part 1)

Will's entire body ached as he rolled out of bed. He cursed himself for fighting so hard the day before. He had enjoyed himself in the moment, but now he was paying the price. He hoped that he would feel better as the day went on.

He was greeted by Hannibal as he entered the great hall and took his seat.

"Did you get your rest?" he asked.

"I'm afraid I will never get a full night's rest," Will sighed. "It took a long time for me to fall asleep."

"Were you ruminating?" Hannibal asked. Will simply bowed his head and ate his breakfast. "It was an eventful day. Much to think about. Just don't let your thoughts rule you."

It was a little too late for that. Will was a loyal subject, bowing down to his own mind. It imprisoned him, tortured him. His endless hypothetical worry left him in shackles.

When the fog of his thoughts rolled away, he realized that Hannibal was talking.

"There is something I would like to ask of you. Not as a knight or a servant, but as my companion."

Will was intrigued, but nervous.

"It isn't for another few weeks, but every autumn, we host a banquet to celebrate the harvest," Hannibal explained. "Held every year on the autumn equinox, it is a formal meal followed by a dance. This year, we've chosen a waltz specifically. You most likely have not heard of it. The dance originates very recently from Germany and is extraordinarily elegant. I learned it from a dear friend. I would like for you to dance with me."

Formal. Dance. Elegant. These were not words that Will associated himself with.

"I see the fear in your eyes," Hannibal said. "Don't worry, I will teach you everything you need to know, including the dance. It will be a grand occasion. The banquet is attended mostly by noblemen and women, but I assure you, you will get along just fine despite the disparity in your backgrounds. The people I invite are only the most personable. They will love you."

Will was still nervous. He hadn't interacted with anyone of status except Hannibal. He didn't know how to act. He knew their titles and that was about it. He didn't want to offend any of Hannibal's friends.

"To start, sit up straight," Hannibal ordered. "Elbows off the table."

Will obliged, feeling a bit awkward.

“There are a few general rules to follow at our parties,” Hannibal said. Will nodded, completely unprepared for the list that followed. “Keep your chin up, chest out, and hands at your side. Do not cross your arms, as this makes you appear closed off and unwilling to meet new people. When speaking to the nobility, try to avoid any knightly slang. They will not know what in the world you are talking about. Always walk with purpose. If you’re unsure of where to be, stay by my side. And lastly, do not lose your temper. If you are offended by any comments made, we can discuss that afterwards, but you mustn't show your anger.”

“I’d say that’s more than a few,” Will said, eyes wide in shock.

“You’ll learn fast,” Hannibal assured him. “Just turn on that chivalry they taught you a decade ago.”

“Those of us along the outer wall did not care too much about being polite when we were constantly being attacked by petty rebels,” Will said as he stood.

“I imagine you had little contact with noblemen, seeing as you lived so far away,” Hannibal said, beginning to lead Wil.

“None,” Will said. “You’re my first.”

“I hope it’s been an enjoyable experience,” Hannibal said, earning a quiet laugh from Will.

“It’s certainly been interesting,” Wil said. “Where are we going?”

“You cannot wear your everyday clothes to the banquet,” Hannibal explained. “I am taking you to my tailor. He usually makes house calls, but my messenger failed to deliver, so we will visit him at his location.”

Will felt nervous leaving the castle. Both times had resulted in him getting hurt. But he trusted that Hannibal would not deliberately put him in danger.

As soon as they set foot on the streets, a few eager noblemen and women approached, attempting to make conversation, but he politely waved them away. They continued on their way peacefully, as it was still somewhat early morning. Hannibal knew that the tailor did not get very busy until later, so he assumed a walk-in would be no issue. Besides, he was the king. People generally avoided pissing off the king, except for Will of course. But look where that got him. Maybe more people should get into bar fights with royalty.

“Isn’t the king supposed to have his own tailor?” Will asked.

“I saw garments made by this man and decided that he was better,” Hannibal said.

They arrived at a small building. Hannibal knocked on the door and out came a shorter man with pins stuck all over his clothes. He looked surprised, yet delighted to see Hannibal.

“Your Majesty!” He greeted him with a small bow.

“No need for that,” Hannibal said. He then gestured towards Will, who suddenly remembered to stand up straight. “My companion is in need of a finer outfit for the harvest banquet.”

“And what shall I call this companion of yours?” the tailor asked.

“Will,” Will said before Hannibal could throw in a William.

“No title?” the tailor asked, raising an eyebrow in suspicion.

“Sir,” Hannibal said.

“Oh, a knight,” the tailor said as he prepared a few things. “I’ve never dressed a knight. Congratulations, Sir Will- What’s the rest of it?”

“Graham,” WIll said, nervous that this guy was gonna run a background check and see one count of aggravated assault on a royal.

“Sir Will Graham,” the tailor said to himself. “Has a nice ring to it. Alright, Will. What style are we going for?”

“Uh…” Will trailed off, looking up at Hannibal.

“We aren’t in need of anything too excessive,” Hannibal said, covering for him. “Just something nicer than his everyday clothes.”

“Alright then, let’s get started,” the tailor said. He gestured towards a box in the middle of the room. “Step up here please.”

Will hesitantly got onto the box. The tailor measured his arm and leg, then around his waist and chest with a rope. Each time, he noted the measurement on a small slip of paper. It didn’t take very long, which surprised Will. Soon, the tailor presented him with a few small pieces of fabric, all different colors and textures.

“This is what I’ve got in the shop,” he said. “If there’s something specific the king requests, I’ll go out and find it.”

Will had no idea what any of these fabrics were. He allowed Hannibal to choose for him. He picked out something in a rich burgundy.

“Ah, this will make a fine garment!” the tailor said. “I will have it ready in no time at all. Have a wonderful day, Your Majesty.”

With that, they left the tailor’s workshop. They began walking down the same street from whence they came when they encountered a noblewoman with an agenda.

“Your Majesty, what a nice surprise,” she said. “And who is this?”

Will looked at Hannibal like this one’s all yours.

“Sir William Graham,” Hannibal said. “He’s-”

“A knight!” the woman exclaimed. “And from the looks of it, a seasoned one”

“Lady Fredericka, I do appreciate your company, but William and I must be getting back to the castle, " Hannibal said.

“Hold on,” Freddie said, taking a second look at William. “You’re the new servant, right?”

Will simply nodded.

“What business did you two have in the forest yesterday?” she asked. “You carried no hunting gear when I saw you.”

“It was part of William’s training,” Hannibal said.

“You were out there for quite a while.” Freddie said, eyeing them both suspiciously.

“We took a wrong turn on our return trip,” Hannibal said. “Paid dearly for it.”

“Does this knight talk?” Freddie asked, turning her attention to Will.

“I choose not to,” Will said.

“A little bird told me you’re only doing this as an alternative to…a less desirable situation,” Freddie said. “I’m curious. After spending nearly a week with His Majesty, would you make the same decision?”

He looked at Hannibal, then at his bruised wrist. He had enjoyed the day before, despite the injuries it gave him. He thought about the way Hannibal treated him. He did not treat him like a servant, but rather, a friend. It confused him, but he also appreciated everything Hannibal had done for him. Even today, he took him to get measured for some fancy clothes to wear at the banquet. He was going to teach him how to dance. This was so much more than servitude. Hannibal was right. This was companionship.

“Yes,” Will said.

“Interesting,” Freddie said. “You just returned from the tailor, no? Will the king be putting you on display at the harvest banquet?”

“I will be attending,” Will said, ignoring her choice of words. He glanced at Hannibal, who looked annoyed. He was not very fond of this Lady Fredericka.

“I hope to see you there,” she said. “Perhaps we can share a dance.”

Will gave a weak, nervous smile. He just wanted to get out of here.

“Lady Fredericka, we truly must leave at once,” Hannibal said. He grabbed Will’s arm and they made their great escape. However, they both still felt Freddie’s eyes on them.

“Who was that?” Will asked as they walked.

“Fredericka Lounds, the town gossip,” Hannibal said. “She’s most interested in spreading rumors. I’d avoid her whenever possible.”

As they made their way back to the castle, Will thought about the questions Freddie had asked them and their answers, wondering what rumor she would craft from the information given. He hoped it wouldn't be anything bad.

--

Still sore from sparring, Will was allowed to rest for a few hours before Hannibal woke him up.

"I regret waking you, but there is something we must talk about," Hannibal said, taking a seat at the edge of the bed.

Will sat up, intrigued but also concerned. Had he done something wrong?

"This morning, you experienced two distinctly different interactions," Hannibal said. "The tailor learned your name and official title, referring to you as such. He respected you. In fact, he was delighted to meet you."

Where was he going with this?

"Lady Fredericka, however, was not as respectful," Hannibal said. "Would you agree?"

"Yes," Will said. "I felt…like I didn't belong here."

"She saw you as a servant," Hannibal said. "There was excitement upon learning you were a knight, but that changed. The worst offense was the objectification."

"She asked if you were going to 'put me on display,'" Will said.

"She will likely give you the same treatment at the banquet" Hannibal said. "There may even be more guests who do not value you as I do. Do not let them hurt you."

Will hadn't thought much about the way Freddie spoke to him. He noticed it, but he had always been used to that kind of thing.

"There is one more thing I would like for you to know," Hannibal said. "Even in the short time we've been in each other's company, I have now ceased viewing you as a servant. In fact, I believe it should not be part of your title."

Will remembered how Hannibal introduced him and his "companion." That word had been used before, but this time was different. He used it in public.

"I consider you a friend, William," He said with a smile. "I can only hope that others may begin to see your worth."

With that, he stood and slowly left the room.

Dinner was quiet, but not in a bad way. It was peaceful, content. They ate in silence, occasionally taking a glance at each other. Even as they watched the sunset, there was minimal conversation.

They didn’t need to talk to enjoy each other’s company.

Raise Your Hand If You've Been Personally Victimized By The Waltz

Chapter Notes

> So sorry for not getting this out yesterday! I had a couple of errands to run and fully passed out afterwards. SO you get an early morning dose of Hannigram today!

Will woke up feeling fresh, ready to take on another day. This was rare, so he intended to take advantage of it. At the breakfast table, Hannibal seemed to notice his high spirits.

“I see you are well slept,” he said. “Very optimistic. Let’s hope you stay that way during today’s activity.”

Will wasn’t sure if he wanted to know what the activity was just yet, but at the same time, curiosity was chewing away at him like termites in a wooden shack.

‘What’s the activity?” he asked, the roof collapsing.

“Today, William, you will begin your journey in learning the waltz,” Hannibal said. “We can start after breakfast if you’d like.”

Oh shit.

Will knew this was coming soon, but not that soon. He thought about the dances he knew. They were all so simple. The name “waltz” just sounded complicated. He finished his breakfast while ruminating on every possible thing that could go wrong. This was interrupted by Hannibal speaking again.

“This dance was passed down to me after a visit to Germany,” Hannibal said, standing up. “I highly doubt the other guests will know of it. I would like for it to be a special moment.”

“So, it’ll just be us?” Will asked as they walked into the empty floor space of the great hall.

“Does that intimidate you? Hannibal asked.

“No,” Will lied.

“Then we can begin,” Hannibal said, bringing Will to the perfect spot.

Will was definitely not ready, but he figured that if he just followed the instructions, everything would be okay…right?

“Take my hand,” Hannibal said, holding out his left hand. Will took it with his right. “Good. Now place your other hand on my shoulder.”

Will obliged, resting his left hand on Hannibal’s shoulder. He soon felt Hanniabl’s other hand across his shoulder blades. All of this felt very strange, being held in this way.

“Are you ready?” Hannibal asked. Will nodded. “We will go one step at a time.”

Will wasn’t sure if he was actually ready. He had a feeling he was going to suck at this, and really wasn’t looking forward to that shot to his self-esteem.

“As I step forward with my left foot, you step back with your right,” Hannibal said. They slowly executed the instructions. “Then, I step to the right with my right foot, while you step to the left with your left foot.”

So far, so good. Well, they were moving at the speed of congress, but it was only the beginning.

“Now, I close my left foot to the right, while you close your right to the left,” Hannibal said as they completed the move. “That is the first half. Let’s put it together before moving forward.”

Will felt okay about this. He slowly but confidently went through the four steps in a more smooth manner.

“Good,” Hannibal said. “This is the part that can be confusing.”

Well shit. Will thought this was going to be a piece of cake, but Hannibal crushed his hopes almost immediately.

“You look frightened,” Hannibal said. “It will be simple as long as you pay attention, and paid even closer attention in the beginning.”

Something about that was even more unsettling.

“Now, you do as I have done,” Hannibal explained. “And I do as you have done.

“What does that mean?” Will asked, looking down at their feet.

“This time, you step forward with your left foot while I step back with my right,” Hannibal explained. With this example, things began to make sense.

“So, it’s flipped?” he guessed.

“An astute observation,” Hannibal said with a slight smile. “If you feel brave, you may attempt to complete the remaining two steps without instruction.”

For some reason, even though he really wasn’t feeling brave, he wanted to try. He hesitantly took a step to the right. Hannibal followed. He then brought his feet together, followed by Hannibal.

“You are learning quickly,” Hannibal said. “Now for the more daunting part. Put all of it together. It may help to count.”

“I’ll try,” Will said, anxiously looking down at his feet. He decided to count one through six. One beat per step.

Things started okay. Around halfway through, Will made a misstep and tripped over Hannibal’s foot, but the rest was surprisingly seamless.

“I wouldn’t call it perfect, but it was the perfect start,” Hannibal said.

What the fuck did that even mean? Will had already given up on trying to understand what Hannibal was saying half the time.

“Let’s continue at this pace, then speed up just a little,” Hannibal said.

Cue the montage.

They practiced for what felt like hours. At first, they laughed at his mistakes, but misstep after misstep eventually frustrated Will. The next time he tripped over his own feet, he tore away.

“William,” Hannibal said. “Take a walk with me.”

Will obliged, letting Hannibal lead him out of the great hall.

“When I learned the waltz, it was not my favorite,” Hannibal said as they walked down a long hallway. “I would become angry at myself for making mistakes. But that’s not the right way to go about it. You must learn from your mistakes.”

“I know,” Will said. “I was the same way learning to fight. The difference is, those mistakes hurt, so you tried even harder to not repeat them.”

“The waltz has hurt you, William,” Hannibal said. “It hurts your confidence, does it not? You feel as though you aren’t good enough to perform the dance.”

“I don’t like when you get inside my head,” Will said.

“You’ve made that abundantly clear,” Hannibal said. “Your mind is just so fascinating. I have yet to meet anyone like you.”

“How hard have you been looking?” Will asked, half in jest.

“I do not use those words in excess,” Hannibal said. “I truly am glad to have met you.”

Will looked down at his feet, anywhere except Hannibal. He once again felt that creeping blush that he despised.

“Have I replenished your confidence sufficiently?” Hannibal asked, stopping.

Will couldn't believe it. Hannibal said all of that just to get him back in a dancing mood? The audacity of this man.

"Yes," he said.

They made their way back to the great hall and picked up where they left off.

Still insecure from his many prior mistakes, Will's eyes were almost exclusively focused on where he was stepping.

"Don't look at your feet," Hannibal reminded him. He was pleased when Will directed his eyes back at him. "You're doing wonderful."

Immediately after he said that, Will stepped on his foot again. But this time, he continued on, bringing a slight smile to Hannibal's face. He was learning. He still sucked, but he was learning.

They sloppily waltzed around the room for another few minutes before Hannibal stopped them.

"That's enough for today," he said, separating from Will. "We will practice at least once per week to ensure you feel comfortable with the steps and do not forget them. For now, there is some spare time before supper. You may rest if you'd like. I'm going to run an errand."

"Don't you need protection?" Will asked.

"You're tired," Hannibal said. "I can have one of the guards take me."

With that, they split, Hannibal leaving one way and Will the other. When Will reached his room, he immediately crawled into bed. Lying there, he couldn't seem to find rest.

The kind of thoughts he was fighting the night after their sparring session was back with a vengeance, this time with feeling. He still felt the waltz in his feet, Hannibal's hand in his hand and on his back. It was unfamiliar, but he felt safe with it.

He rolled onto his side, letting these feelings envelop him. He didn't know what to call it, but it was comforting, lulling him to sleep.

--

Will yawned and stretched all the way to the great hall for dinner. He felt he had taken the best nap in his life.

"I see you slept well," Hannibal said as he sat down. "What's your secret?"

Will thought about the moment before he fell asleep. He remembered that strange feeling he experienced, how it made him feel. Then, in his rested state, he thought to himself that maybe there was a reason he felt that way. Like dreams, it had to mean something. That meaning hit him like a wave and he suddenly found himself drowning in it.

He desperately tried to swim to the surface, but every time he got close, the water got deeper. There was no floor to kick off of. His lungs burned as he struggled to hold his breath. As he thought he was going to die, something grabbed him and pulled him up out of the water. He lay on the ground, coughing and sputtering. It was only when he saw his savior that he realized.

He had begun to develop romantic feelings towards Hannibal. Oh god, oh fuck.

“William,” Hannibal said. Will nearly jumped out of his skin, as he had been deep in thought. “Which corner of your mind were you stuck in?”

Will couldn’t think of an appropriate answer. He couldn’t tell the truth. Not yet. He needed time to sift through his scrambled thoughts to find full sentences. Everything that wasn’t the truth had scattered on the floor and he didn’t have time to pick it up.

“You can be honest with me, William,” Hannibal said. “You know I value honesty.”

Will didnt want to lie to Hannibal, but he also didn’t want to tell him that he was starting to have a little crush on him. He had to think of something, and fast.

All of this stemmed from the waltz, so maybe he could use that. That way his answer would have some truth to it.

“I was just…thinking about the waltz,” he said. “I hope I don’t forget the steps before our next practice.”

“If you do, I can teach them to you again,” Hannibal said. “It will be easier the second time around.”

“How was your errand?” Will asked, trying to change the subject.

“I visited a fine jeweler for a consultation regarding a custom piece I would like to have made for the banquet,” Hannibal said. “It’s going to be a beautiful gold necklace embossed with the royal arms.”

“I’ve never worn jewelry,” Will said. “Many of my fellow knights wore pearls into battle. It was supposed to protect them from harm.”

“Why didn’t you?” Hannibal asked.

“I never believed in all of that,” Will said. “Though, that could be the reason I have so many scars. Either that or the fact that I would sometimes run out without armor if the situation was dire enough. Bad habit.”

”A bad habit indeed,” Hannibal said. “I’m surprised you didn’t get yourself killed.”

“I am too,” Will said. “I always got yelled at afterwards, but I saved lives.”

“I’m sure you did,” Hannibal said. “You are an excellent swordsman. I have no doubt that you were perfectly capable of defending yourself and others.”

“Speaking of swords, when do I get mine back?” Will asked.

“Just as I said before, I will return your sword to you when it is necessary,” Hannibal said as they finished their meal.

Not only did he really want his sword, but Will was also dreading their little garden talk. He couldn’t take any more questions from Hannibal. But alas, he had no choice but to join him on the bench as they watched the sunset.

“We often talk about the past,” Hannibal said. “What do you see in your future, William?”

“I used to see myself dying honorably in battle,” Will said. “But not by an arrow or a stab. I wanted it to be something more interesting, like getting disemboweled.”

“I certainly hope that does not happen to you,” Hannibal said. “It would be a shame if you were gone from this world.”

Will studied the gravel. He wanted to look literally anywhere other than at Hannibal. He knew he’d had a chronic blush all afternoon, and it was only getting worse.

“William, you’ve been acting strange all afternoon,” Hannibal said. “You’re much quieter than usual.”

“I’m not trying to be,” Will said. “I just don’t have much to say, I guess.”

“Then we don’t have to say anything at all.” Hannibal said. He then turned to watch the sky.

Will thought talking to Hannibal was bad. Sitting in silence with him was worse. His thoughts ran free like a feral chihuahua with the zoomies, dragging him around in circles at disorienting speeds.

What if Hannibal had already figured it out? He was just waiting for the right moment to have that conversation. Will wasn’t ready for that. He hoped he would have more time.

And that he seemingly did. Over the next three weeks, Will found every possible way to stall for time. He would change the subject, or ask a question back. He made Hannibal tell him stories, show him sentimental items. He felt the most vulnerable when they practiced the waltz. The way Hannibal looked at him…he could barely take it. Despite this distraction, he did get much better at dancing. He was able to complete the steps at full speed and no longer stepped on Hannibal’s feet. Hannibal praised him, which he quite liked, and even taught Will more complex moves, like a turn. He didn’t feel very confident doing it, as it sometimes made him a little dizzy. However, Hannibal insisted that he could do it. As the banquet grew closer, things seemed busier around the castle. They would often attend meetings to make decisions on things, such as food, decorations, and entertainment. The morning of, they watched as the great hall was transformed into a beautiful space of autumnal colors. It took hours, but it was well worth the wait. In the hours before the celebration, but rested in their rooms until it was an appropriate time to get ready.

And so, they waited.

The Bimbofication Of Will Graham (Part 2)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As the time for the banquet approached, Hannibal began getting dressed, with the help of his favorite -- and only -- servant. Will reckoned he didn't need the help, but rather he just wanted Will to be there. He was okay with that, though.

The king's ensemble was extravagant. Will helped him into a fitted under-tunic, then a beautiful outer layer of gold-embroidered plum silk. The waist was cinched with a fine leather belt, and a soft olive cloak was draped over his shoulders, held into place by a brooch. Will laced up his leather shoes and the look was complete.

Hannibal looked out his window towards the bell tower. The clock read half past three.

"It is almost time," Hannibal said. "Guests will begin to arrive soon. I must be in the great hall to greet them. And you must get dressed quickly."

Hannibal led him back to his room, prepping Will's outfit while the knight undressed. It was a beautiful burgundy number, complete with delicate embroidery around the neckline and hem.

As he turned around to hand Will the tunic, he was taken aback by the pure chaotic state of Will's body. A multitude of scars ran up, down, and across his torso and shoulders. Against his better judgment, he found himself tracing one with his finger. It ran along his collarbone and down onto his chest.

"I wasn't kidding when I said I charged into battle without armor," Will said. "I was also very stupid when I was young, getting myself hurt in many foolish ways. Though, I'd rather not dwell on that pain."

"What's in the past cannot hurt you anymore," Hannibal said. "Not physically, at least. I just hope that you will not be hurt again."

"I'll be more careful now that I have the king depending on me," Will said with a smirk.

"You should care more for yourself," Hannibal said as he began helping Will get dressed. Once he was fully clothed, Hannibal once again glanced towards the clock tower. "Oh, dear. I am needed in the great hall immediately. Please, fix your hair."

Hannibal began to dart out of the room, but stopped at the door frame.

"William, before I go, I must give you something," he said. He pulled out a small cloth bag. Inside lay a gold necklace, embossed with the royal arms. He took it out and walked behind Will. He placed it around Will's neck and secured the clasp. When he was finished, he stood across from Will, admiring him. "It's beautiful on you."

“Wait…” Will trailed off, staring down at the golden pendant. “When you went to the jeweler… It was for me?”

“Yes, William,” Hannibal said. “I wanted to ensure that you looked stunning at the banquet. However, it is yours to keep.”

As Hannibal departed for good, Will found himself blushing for about the thirtieth time since he began this strange arrangement.

He picked up the small mirror that Hannibal had given him. It was the first time he had seen himself since he first got there. He felt good about his appearance, which was foreign to him.

His skin was clearer, free of abrasions, small cuts, and bruises. His eyes had a joyful sparkle to them. Most importantly, Hannibal had recently provided him with a fine comb. His hair was in order, though it was getting quite long. It framed his face nicely, now that he saw his face as something worthy of framing.

This time, he left the mirror face-up before leaving his room.

He felt his nerves rising as he made his way down the long hallway. He worried about his ability to socialize with the nobility. He worried that he would freeze up and fumble the waltz. Or worse, forget it entirely. He worried that as soon as he felt Hannibal hand in his own, he would simply melt.

All of his worries peaked as he stood outside the doors to the great hall. He could hear chatter inside. People were already there.

As he hesitantly walked through the doors, he was immediately the center of attention. Everyone seemed to stop what they were doing to turn to look at him. He felt like he was locked in the pillory, on display.

He scanned the room to find Hannibal. He stood in a small group. Will hurried over to the one person he felt comfortable with at this party. The guests began to mingle once more.

“William, you are breathtaking,” Hannibal said quietly, as if he only wanted Will to hear. “I fear I must protect you from the women who will no doubt try to steal you away from me.”

Hannibal wasn’t trying to hide anything from Will apparently. Either that, or he was really messing with him.

“Who is this?” a blonde woman asked.

“He is Sir William Graham,” Hannibal said, presenting Will to the group of women.

There were three of them. The first two were unfamiliar, but he recognized Freddie.

“We’ve met before,” Freddie said. “He’s not the most talkative. At least, not to me. I’m sure he and His Majesty have all kinds of conversations.”

“William, you’ve met Lady Fredericka,” Hannibal said. He then gestured to the other two women. “This is Lady Bedelia Du Maurier and Lady Alana Bloom.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you,” Bedelia said.

“His Majesty has told us about you,” Alana said.

Will shot Hannibal a look that read what the fuck did you tell them?

“Don’t worry, William, it was only the good,” Hannibal assured him.

Still curious, Will made a mental note to ask one of the women if he spoke to them alone.

“So, Sir William, “ Freddie said. “I never asked when we last met. What’s your story?”

“It’s a long one,” Will said. “Or a very large collection of smaller stories.”

“We’d love to hear one of these stories,” Freddie said

Will wasn’t sure where to start. So much had happened in his life, but much of it was too dark to share at a banquet.

“Tell us how you met,” Bedelia said.

Will looked at Hannibal, nervous.

“Choose your details wisely,” Hannibal said quietly.

“We met in a tavern,” Will said hesitantly. “After a victory against a small threat, myself and the other knights involved were celebrating because everyone came back relatively uninjured. The king approached me in disguise and we got to talking. One thing led to another, and now I spend my days here.”

“Oh?” Freddie gave him a strange look. “I’m curious what you omit. Is it not appropriate for this venue?”

It was at this precise moment, Will knew he had fucked up.

“Not in the way you think,” Will said in a panic. The group laughed. He looked up and even Hannibal had a slight smile on his face. He felt betrayed.

“It’s okay, we won’t tell,” Freddie said, even though she was definitely going to spread this rumor.

“I see no issue with people of different classes getting along,” Alana chimed in.

“I’m sure they get along well despite their differences,” Bedelia said.

Will was losing his goddamn mind, and Hannibal just smiled through it all.

“If you’ll excuse us, we must get seated,” Hannibal said. “I suggest you do the same.”

The dining table was a U shape, with nobles sitting down the sides and a high table for the king in the middle. The high table was decorated with a beautiful damask, protected by a surnap.

Everyone found their assigned seats except for Will, who stood behind Hannibal.

“William, sit down,” Hannibal said, placing a hand on the top rail of the chair to his left.

“This table is reserved for royalty,” Will said. “That would technically be the queen’s chair, if there were one.”

“But there is not,” Hannibal said. “So it is your chair now.”

Will hesitantly sat next to Hanninbal. He swore he heard a few whispers, specifically in the direction of Freddie.

“Don’t mind the gossip,” Hannibal said. “They all talk, but they have nothing to say for themselves.”

“Do you not care what people think of you?” Will asked.

“I stopped quite a long time ago,” Hannibal said. “However, I do care how people feel about me.”

“Aren’t those the same?” Will was confused.

“No,” Hannibal said. “I do not worry that people hate me, but if they love me, I’d like to know.”

With this, Hannibal turned away to watch as everyone got settled, leaving Will alone with his thoughts.

He was kicking himself for what he had said to the women. He should’ve known that such phrasing would cause a spectacle. With the speed at which Freddie Lounds could spread misinformation, he reckoned that half the banquet now thought he and Hannibal…He didn’t want to think about it anymore. Unfortunately his other options to ponder on were not much better.

Hannibal was acting strangely. Perhaps it was just an act he put on for social events, but Will didn’t appreciate the teasing. In fact, he hated it. He was ninety-nine percent sure that Hannibal felt the same as he did, but there was no way to know for sure.

Well, there was one way, but there was NO chance he would ask him. He’d rather sit in this pot of confusion and stew. Maybe he’d nibble on some carrots while he was in there.

He couldn’t remain in this state forever. Eventually, he was going to get answers, whether he was prepared for it or not.

He was coaxed out of his rumination cave when the first course arrived. It was a wonderful pottage, a thick soup of meat and vegetables, boiled and mashed. Will knew not to eat all of

it, for there were more courses to come. He had never been to a feast or banquet, but those who had told the rest of the knights all about it.

The second course was roasted chicken, stuffed with herbs and spices to perfection. Will remembered eating a meal very similar to this in his first few days at the castle.

Before the main attraction was to be served, two men in ridiculous colorful clothing entered.

“That is Zeller and Price, a comedy duo,” Hannibal said. “They specialize in what they call a ‘roast.’ They gather information about the guests and tell playful jokes about them. As the night goes on, they tell more scandalous jokes.”

“Who do they usually pick?” Will asked.

“Everyone is fair game, including myself,” Hannibal said.

Will was suddenly terrified. Based on people’s current impressions of him, he knew he was going to have to hide his face from Hannibal. He hoped and prayed that they didn’t find out about the “one thing led to another” comment. Or anything about him, honestly.

“Hello, ladies and gentlemen,” said the shorter one. Hannibal informed him that he was Price. “We are honored that His Majesty has chosen us to perform for you today.”

“If you’re familiar, you may know what is about to happen,” said the other, who Will guessed was Zeller.

“We have come to roast you all,” Price said. “Nothing’s off limits and no one is safe.”

“Who will be the first?” Brian asked. To Will’s surprise, many guests raised their hands.

“Lady Fredericka Lounds!” Price announced. “Our brave roastee. Lady Fredericka, you should go work in the kitchen, because you like to stir the pot.”

There was a collective laugh from the guests. Even Hannibal let out a chuckle.

“Lady Fredericka!” Zeller said. “I heard a rumor that women who gossip will lose their tongues. I beg you to tell me where you got your prosthetic.”

“Lady Fredericka!” chimed Price. “Have you ever been caught in a lie?”

“No,” Freddie said.

“Now you have!” Price said, both of them laughing along with the guests.

“Next up we choose Lady Bedelia Du Maurier!” Zeller announced. “Beware, for we are turning up the heat.”

“Lady Bedelia,” Price said. “We all know you are close friends with the king. But not as close as you were to killing a man when you saw who he was cheating with.”

The room was filled with laughter, as the king and his companion had been the whole banquet's topic of discussion. Will wasn't as joyful as the rest.

"Why are they talking about me?" he asked, turning to Hannibal. "It's Lady Bedelia's turn."

"Nothing is off limits, and no one is safe," Hannibal said, repeating what the jesters had announced at the beginning.

"Lady Bedelia!" Zeller said. "Your conversations with His Majesty are said to be longer than a mass. Is it because you were too invested to know the mass was over?"

That one was a hit, but Price had a trick up his sleeve.

"Lady Bedelia," he said, softening his voice a tad. "No one knows what you and the king talk about behind closed doors, but I'm sure there'd be chatter, for everyone would be trying to decipher the pretentious language!"

With that, it was time for the next victim. Will was mortified when he heard his name.

"Sir William Graham," Zeller said. "Seasoned knight and servant to the king, but you all know that because he's likely all you've been talking about this afternoon. Quite the celebrity."

"Sir William," Price said. "We heard you met His Majesty in a tavern. How drunk did he have to be to take you home?"

It was the first joke and Will was already feeling angry. He knew they would only get worse.

"Sir William," Zeller said. "As a knight, you have earned many scars. So many, I'm convinced you run onto the battlefield in the nude!"

Will found himself reluctantly laughing at that one because it was so close to the truth. He hoped the final joke would be just as harmless.

"Sir William," Price said. "I'm told you prefer to go by Will because it's much easier to shout across the battlefield. Is that what you call His Majesty's bed chambers?"

The guests absolutely lost their shit. Hannibal looked over to see Will glaring daggers at the jesters.

"Do not let your anger rule you, William," Hannibal whispered.

"We hope it didn't get too hot for you, Sir William," Zeller said. "You must save that passion for later."

Will literally looked like he was about to murder these guys in cold blood. It was good that he didn't have sword privileges.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Price said. "It is my honor to welcome His Majesty King Hannibal Lecter VIII to the chopping block!"

The guests applauded.

“The king has given us permission to give it everything we’ve got,” Zeller said. “I promise we won’t hold back.”

“Do your worst,” Hannibal said.

“Your Majesty,” Price said. “I’ve heard you like to spar with your servant to keep him in shape. Tell me, how badly does he kick your ass?”

Will exhaled really hard through his nose, distracted from his anger for a moment. They both laughed because they knew the opposite was true.

“Your Majesty,” Zeller said. “Most kings have many servants, but you refused to employ one until now. What changed? Did you run out of pretty things to look at?”

Will glanced at Hannibal, remembering all the time he had commented on his “beauty.” Surely, there was no truth to Zeller’s statement, but Will was still concerned.

“Your Majesty,” Price began. “In all your greatness, you have one flaw: you have terrible taste in men. I mean, a knight? We all know chivalry is dead.”

The guests erupted in laughter. It lasted for what felt like a whole minute. Every second, Will grew angrier. He hadn’t been this upset since that night at the tavern.

Hannibal placed a firm hand on his knee, ensuring that he couldn’t walk up there and beat the shit out of Zeller and Price.

“William, you mustn’t let the things they say hurt you,” Hannibal said. “There will always be rumors, but you know the truth.”

The truth was, all those things they joked about…that’s what he wanted.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you appreciated Zeller and Price's roasts. My favorite was the "bed chambers" one tbh

Shoved Into The Medieval Dance Circle

After the jesters left, the main course was served. It was a roasted wild boar, whole. Next, they enjoyed pears submerged in red wine. Finally, a fine selection of local nuts and berries.

Will ate in silence. Hannibal knew better than to attempt a conversation at this time.

When the meal was finished, they all left their seats to mingle once more.

“William, I must leave you for a moment to have a word with the chef,” Hannibal said. “Feel free to speak with guests, but remember what I told you earlier. Choose your details wisely. And if they begin to anger you, politely end the conversation.”

“Got it,” Will said. With that, Hannibal was gone.

Will wasn’t afraid of being alone. He was afraid of everyone else, specifically Lady Fredericka Lounds.

“Sir Graham,” a voice greeted him from the side. Speaking of the devil, he turned to see Freddie. “Why are you standing here all alone?”

“Han-uh, His Majesty left to talk to the chef,” Will explained. Freddie seemed to take a mental note of his slip.

“So he’s abandoned you at peak social hour?” Freddie asked, a false sympathy in her voice.

“I wouldn’t say abandoned,” Will said. “He’ll be back soon.”

“Well, why don’t I keep you company?” Freddie suggested. “I’d love to hear all about what it’s like to be so close to the king.”

“I wouldn’t love to share,” Will said.

“I know he sees you as more than a servant,” Freddie said.

“He sees me as a friend,” Will said.

“A very close friend,” Freddie said. “I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors.”

“All afternoon,” Will said. “I can’t escape it.”

“Then maybe there’s some truth to them,” Freddie said with a smile. “What you say by accident reveals a lot about what truly lies within that mind of yours.”

“I know you’re the one spreading these lies,” Will said, lowering his voice. “And you told the jesters this rumor, passing it as truth.”

“Their jokes seemed to anger you,” Freddie said. “Why?”

“It’s humiliating,” Will said. “Being the butt of every joke.”

“You’ll eventually get used to it,” Freddie said. “The roast is a favorite amongst us.”

He was used to it. The knights made fun of each other all the time. The only difference is their jokes were based on what they knew to be true.

“Well, I will leave you to wait,” Freddie said, walking away.

Will looked around at all the guests, searching for some to talk to who wouldn’t interrogate him. Bedelia happened to be nearby. Will now knew that she was close with Hannibal. Maybe he could learn more about him through her.

“Hello Sir Graham,” she said as he approached her. “What have you come to me for?”

“You’re close with His Majesty,” Will said. “Even though we are friends, I sometimes feel like he’s a mystery to me.”

“You want me to give you information about him?” Bedelia said. Will nodded. “Is this not similar to the gossip that you despise?”

“No,” Will said. “I’m asking for the truth, not a rumor.”

“I will entertain you only once,” Bedelia said. “I don’t need you to ask questions. I know what answers you’re looking for. You want to know what His Majesty thinks of you.”

Will was silent.

“The king often talks of a mysterious romantic interest,” she said. “All this time, I’ve been searching for a feisty woman with sparkling eyes and curly dark hair.”

Will froze. He didn’t have to ask Hannibal about his feelings. He could ask Bedelia.

“Is Hannibal…” Will paused, wondering whether or not this was a good idea. “Is Hannibal in love with me?”

“An interesting question,” Bedelia said. “Something tells me you already know the answer.”

Will was lost. He just wanted confirmation. From anybody.

“There you are,” he heard Hannibal say behind him. Will turned to face him. “You’ve been very popular at this gathering. One may find it difficult to keep track of you.”

“He is a fascinating man,” Bedelia said.

“That he is,” Hannibal. He then outstretched a hand towards Will. “Would you care to dance with me, William?”

“Of course,” Will said, taking it. He was nervous inside, but putting on his best performance. He looked back at Bedelia, who simply smiled and nodded, as if to answer his previous

question.

They made their way onto the dancefloor with a dozen other pairs. As soon as the king was in place, the music began. There were drums, a lute, a vielle, a harp, a flute, and one guy absolutely shredding on the hurdy-gurdy.

Hannibal was grateful for the absence of a shawm. He quite disliked the instrument. It sounded as though it had a stuffy nose.

The music started cheerfully. Will could've sworn he even recognized the song from a much smaller celebration he had attended many years ago. He also knew there was a dance that often accompanied this song, one he actually knew. The other pairs began gathering in a circle.

"It's the Peascods," Will whispered to Hannibal, not remembering the full name. However, Hannibal understood. They joined the group.

The music picked up as they began dancing in a circle, all holding hands. At certain points, the men walked to the center, leaving the women behind. Then, they would switch. At last, they would come back together and start over.

The dance entertained them for quite a while before the song ended and everyone broke away. Hannibal led Will over to the side.

"I don't want us to tire ourselves out before the waltz," he said.

"I'm going to need all the help I can get," Will said.

Suddenly, a new challenger approached.

"Lord Frederick," Hannibal said with slight surprise, but also partial annoyance. He turned to Will. "This is Lord Frederick Chilton."

"Greetings, Your Majesty," Chilton said as he took a bow. "I must say, your cloak is exquisite. And that brooch? Stunning. Don't even get me started on the tunic. The embroidery is gorgeous!"

"You are very observant," Hannibal said. He then gestured towards Will. "You must meet Sir William Graham, my companion."

"Are you averse to the word servant?" Chilton asked. Hannibal glared at him.

"I no longer see him that way," Hannibal said, placing a hand on Will's shoulder. Will began to blend in with his clothing.

"To each their own," Chilton sighed. "I hear you were a peasant before becoming a knight. How on earth did you manage that?"

"I was…I guess you could say adopted as a young boy," Will said. "When I-"

“You were an orphan?” Chilton asked. “How tragic.” The last bit came out in a tone that sounded a little insincere to Will, but he ignored it.

“Yes,” Will said. “A knight took me in as a page. You know the rest.”

“William has faced many hardships in his life,” Hannibal said, rescuing Will from the embarrassment. “He grew up to be very strong, though he is also very stubborn.”

“They always are,” Chilton said.

“He refuses to give up,” Hannibal said. “No matter how much he suffers, he will continue. And he is a passionate fighter, putting himself at risk to protect others.”

“I imagine his swordsmanship is impressive,” Chilton said. “But have you taught him that fancy new dance you spoke of last we talked?”

“Yes,” Hannibal said, looking over at Will. “He has become quite good at it, in fact.”

“I’m sure he is,” Chilton said. “Sir William, you seemed very agitated during Zeller and Price’s performance.”

“Nearly every joke was somehow about me,” Will said.

“You’re a hot topic,” Chilton said. “Everyone is curious about your story.”

“I know,” Will said. “I wish I could cool down.”

“William’s story is his to keep if he chooses,” Hannibal said.

“Has he told you?” Chilton asked.

“Yes,” Hannibal said. “In-depth.”

“Perhaps those jesters weren't just joking around,” Chilton said with a grin. Will’s anger instantly returned. Chilton sensed the potential danger “Well, I have other social duties to attend to. I look forward to your performance.”

He walked away to join a small group. When Hannibal spotted Alana standing by herself, he led Will over to her.

“Something to cleanse the palette,” he said as they walked. “Lady Alana is much more respectful.”

“Hello, Your Majesty,” Alana said with a small curtsy. “Have you been enjoying the banquet?”

“It has been an eventful afternoon,” Hannibal said. “Everything seems to have been a success so far.”

“What about you, Will?” Alana asked. “You do prefer the name Will, correct?”

“Yes,” Will said. “His Majesty has his own reasons for calling me William.”

“How are you feeling?” she asked. “Did the dance help take your mind off of what they said about you? It was too far in my opinion.”

“Yes, actually,” Will said. “I’m not murderously angry anymore.”

“That’s definitely a good thing,” Alana said. “Would you mind me asking for your side? I’m interested as to how much those jesters pulled from nowhere.”

“They were all based upon lies,” Hannibal said.

“The only joke that had a drop of truth in it was the one about my scars,” Will said. “I wear clothes, but I have been known to run onto the battlefield with nothing but a sword and shield.”

“You’re very brave,” Alana said. “I can see why Hannibal wanted you as his protector. He must trust you a lot.”

“It is mutual,” Hannibal said. “I protect William as he protects me.”

“He certainly must be more than a servant to you now,” Alana said. “You speak of him like a friend.

“He is my friend,” Hannibal said, looking over at Will. “I value him far above what our society recommends.”

“What you have is wonderful,” Alana said with a smile. “I wish the others could see the truth.”

“Even when presented with an opportunity to do so, they would prefer to stay blind,” Hannibal said.

“Well, I hope to see you waltz,” she said. “I’ve never seen it before, so I look forward to it.”

She smiled at Will before she walked away.

It wasn’t long before the music slowed. It was time for the waltz.

Will looked at Hannibal, slightly worried. Hannibal simply held out his hand. Will’s nerves backed down as he took it. They made their way to the floor, taking the center. They were alone, as this would be most of the guests’ first exposure to the dance.

As the music reached its final tempo, they arranged themselves. Will’s heart was pounding. He wasn’t sure if it was due to his anxiety or Hannibal’s hands on him or both. Probably both. There were so many people around, all having their own conversation. Combined with the band and his racing thoughts, he felt he was going to lose his goddamn mind.

But somehow, the sound of Hannibal’s voice managed to find its way to Will through all that madness.

“Stop thinking, William,” he said. Will obliged.

He looked down to ensure that his feet were in the correct place. He then looked back up at Hannibal with a slight nervous smile. At the next beat, they began gliding through the steps. Will found himself counting at a whisper as a nervous habit. He wasn’t sure if Hannibal noticed. But soon, he found his rhythm and the moves felt seamless.

Will made an attempt to look around as they danced. He saw everyone standing on the side, simply spectating. Among them were Alana and Bedelia. Alana was smiling, but Bedelia had a strange expression on her face. She looked…intrigued, to give it a word. Will figured they were mostly watching Hannibal. Or, he was hoping.

With all eyes on them, Will hoped that Hannibal would not attempt the turn. No, he prayed. If they weren’t actively dancing, he would be on his knees, begging Hannibal to skip the turn.

Of course, Hannibal didn’t seem to get the memo.

“Remember what we practiced,” Hannibal said. “Turn.”

Will tried his best to remember the steps. He stepped forward with his right foot, turning it to the right, then stepped to the side with his left foot, continuing the turn.

Just as he thought he felt okay about his performance, he had the worst of luck. As he brought his right foot together with his left, he got caught by the tip of Hannibal’s shoe and tripped. His legs buckled as he lost his balance. But instead of falling to the ground, he found himself in Hannibal’s arms.

Will suddenly felt his heart racing and a hot flash throughout his entire body. His hands trembled and he felt short of breath. The music distorted into a horrible cacophony.

He ruined it. All eyes were on him and Hannibal and he screwed it up.

“Breathe, William,” Hannibal said quietly. “Imagine that we are alone.”

As he was lifted back to his feet, Will closed his eyes. He thought of their first lesson, how Hannibal encouraged him to keep trying. If he wanted to live up to his reputation, he couldn’t give up.

They began the regular steps again. With nothing but Hannibal’s touch, Will felt safe. His feet went on autopilot as his mind drifted away.

Was he ready to confess his feelings to Hannibal? He knew Hannibal felt the same, so why not? Tonight was perfect. He just needed to find the courage.

But what would he say? So many possibilities floated around in his head like those little rubber ducks at the state fair. Which one would win him a goldfish?

His rumination was interrupted when the waltz suddenly came to an end. Will opened his eyes as they parted. The guests applauded both the musicians and dancers. As Hannibal and Will left the dance floor, they were approached by many of them.

“That was wonderful,” Alana said, the smile still on her face. “I’ve never seen dancing like that before. It was beautiful.”

“And I believe Sir William had only learnt the dance a few weeks ago,” Bedelia said “quite impressive indeed.”

“Is that true?” Freddie asked. “You two must have practiced a lot.”

“It was spectacular,” Chilton said. “His Majesty looked so graceful.”

“Thank you all,” Hannibal said. “I am delighted that you enjoyed the dance.”

“Not just the dance, but the food as well!” Chilton said. “Your chefs are culinary magicians.”

“Yes, they are,” Hannibal agreed. He then placed a hand on William’s shoulder. “If you’ll excuse us, I would like to speak with William in private.

“Take all the time you need,” Freddie said with a shit-eating grin.

Hannibal led Will to a less crowded area.

“Would you like to sneak away for a moment?” Hannibal asked. “There is something we must discuss.”

“Anything to slouch again,” Will said. He was growing tired from forcing his back to be straight.

“Come with me,” Hannibal said, taking his arm and leading him out of the great hall.

The Girls Are Fighting (Part Three??)

As he and Hannibal traveled down the hall, elbows interlocked, Will's heart was beating faster than ever before. He couldn't listen to his mind, for it was telling him what was about to happen.

They walked to the gardens. The sun had begun its descent into the void. It was just the same as any of their other talks. They sat down on the bench, arguably closer together than usual.

"Have you enjoyed the banquet?" Hannibal asked. "Minus the roast."

"Yes," Will said. "Minus the roast."

"You were very upset," Hannibal said. "Do you still feel that way?"

Will wasn't enraged anymore, but he was still frustrated.

"To a lesser degree," Will said.

"Why do you say that?" Hannibal asked.

"I'm no longer fighting thoughts of murder," Will said. "But now I'm anxious."

"What are you worried about?" Hannibal asked.

"Those rumors," Will said. "They've spread like a disease."

"Remember what I told you," Hannibal said. "There will always be rumors, but you know the truth. People can say whatever they want, but that does not change your reality. Lies may be the greatest enemy you will ever encounter, but the easiest way to defeat them is to not engage at all. Instead, focus on what you know to be true. Try it, in your head."

The rumors stated that he and Hannibal were in an intimate relationship. This was not the case. But the truth was, that's all Will wanted. He wanted to kiss and hold him. He wanted to be held. He wanted to fall asleep in his arms and wake up next to him. He wanted to love and to be loved by Hannibal.

If he got what he wanted, he wouldn't care what anyone else said about them.

--

Back at the banquet, gossip was in full swing. Freddie, Bedelia, Alana, and Chilton stood in a circle, discussing their theories on what the king and his servant could possibly be doing.

"When I last spoke to Sir Graham, he was freshly roasted," Freddie said. "He was very protective of the truth, also very offended by the more risqué punchlines. My guess? They're on the battlefield."

There was a chorus of giggles from the group. Alana rolled her eyes.

“I wonder what strategies they will employ,” Chilton said. “Who will attack and who will defend?”

“His Majesty already has power over him,” Freddie. “Might as well stick to what you know.”

“Have you considered the fact that Sir Graham learned to waltz for this banquet?” Bedelia asked. “He doesn’t seem to be afraid of trying something new.”

“And there’s more evidence to back that up,” Chilton said. “If Sir Graham is a servant, he serves, right?”

“You have a point,” Freddie said, deep in thought.

“Can we not start a debate on who is the dominant partner?” Alana begged. “We don’t even know if they’re together. They probably just wanted to speak in privacy.”

“Perhaps they are not together…yet,” Bedelia said, remembering her conversation with Will.

“Then who makes the first move?” Chilton asked.

“This isn’t any better,” Alana said. “I will not take part in this shameless conversation.”

With that, she left, but the gossip continued.

“Sir Graham was very quiet when we first met,” Freddie said. “I doubt he’d have the courage.”

“But His Majesty is very reserved,” Bedelia said. “He is not quick to fully act on his feelings.”

“I agree,” Chilton said. “I believe the knight will act on impulse. He seems to be a ticking time bomb when it comes to his emotions.”

“I guess we’ll just have to wait and see,” Freddie said.

—

“What do you think they're all talking about in there?” Will asked, studying the gravel. “Us?”

“Do not dwell on it, William,” Hannibal.

“That’s easier said than done,” Will said, getting frustrated. “You were born in the public eye. You’re used to this.”

“William, there is no need to start an argument,” Hannibal said. “It will be tempting to lash out at those around you, but you must resist the urge.”

“I don’t want to argue with you,” Will said. “You just happen to be pissing me off at the moment.”

“What do you want me to do?” Hannibal asked. “I am open to any request if it will calm you.”

“Tell me why you let this happen,” Will said. “You could stop it all at once, but you didn’t.”

“I cannot control others’ thoughts,”Hannibal said. “I’m a monarch, not a god.”

“All afternoon, you have watched as an entire room of noblemen and women pointed and laughed at me,” Will said, standing. “And your first thought was to stop me.”

“I did not want you to get yourself in trouble,” Hannibal said. “Violence is not tolerated at these events. If you dislike your reputation now, you certainly wouldn’t be happy after assaulting another high-ranking individual. You’re lucky I showed mercy when it was me.”

“That wasn’t mercy,” Will said. “That was interest, dare I say intrigue.”

“You did interest me,” Hannibal said as he also stood. “I saw potential in you.”

“The potential for what?” Will said, raising his voice. “The potential for what, Hannibal?”

Hannibal was caught off guard by the sudden switch in energy. Will wasn’t being facetious. He wasn’t exaggerating. These emotions were very real, and they’d drive them both into the ground if Hannibal didn’t choose his words carefully.

“William, our relationship has evolved far beyond what it was back then,” Hannibal said.

“Answer the goddamn question,” Will demanded.

“I’m afraid I cannot tell you, for I don’t know the answer myself,” Hannibal said.

Will said nothing, but stormed off, back towards the great hall. Hannibal grabbed him by the arm and turned him around, hands now on Will’s shoulders. Will did not shrug him off, but he didn’t look happy either.

“Let go of me,” Will said in a scarily calm voice.

“Not until you calm down,” Hannibal said quietly. It’s like he was trying to soothe him, but it wasn’t working. He was practically shaking with anger, hands balled into fists.

“I won’t hold back,” Will said.

“Do it,” Hannibal said. “Go back to your old ways. It will only hurt you.”

With that, Will grabbed Hannibal and threw him onto the ground, climbing on top. He grasped Hannibal’s cloak as he raised his fist. Lecter didn’t flinch. He simply stared into Will’s eyes, a willing expression on his face. Will hesitated, losing his grip.

“Why can’t you do it?” Hannibal asked. “You’re angry with me, aren’t you?”

“Stop talking,” Will said.

“Does that make it easier?” Hannibal asked.

“Get out of my head!” Will said, more aggressive.

“Follow your desires, William,” Hannibal said. “Wherever they may take you.”

Will knew he couldn’t do it. He loved Hannibal too much to hurt him now over something so trivial. He could barely even remember what started the argument. Trembling, he lowered his fist.

Follow your desires, wherever they may take you.

In that moment, his anger surrendered. He found himself fully lost in Hannibal’s eyes.

“They take me to you,” he said before slowly leaning down to kiss him.

Immediately, he felt all of the tension in his body leave him. Even in the chilly autumn air, he was warm as he felt Hannibal’s arms wrap around him, holding him tight. He thought back to the days when he could only imagine this warmth and comfort.

There in Hannibal’s embrace, Will was no longer concerned about what others thought. He got what he wanted.

He dreaded the end of their kiss when it eventually came. Will pulled away and tucked his head into the crook of Hannibal’s neck. He intended to stay there until the sun set, but Hannibal seemed to have other ideas.

“William, I regret to disturb you, but we must return to the banquet,” he said. “I have social duties to attend to.”

Will sat up and got off of Hannibal. He stood and offered a hand to help Will up. They dusted themselves off and began walking towards the great hall. Will squeezed his hand before they entered.

As they walked in, nearly everyone in the room turned to look at them. As their eyes traveled down, there began a chorus of whispers. It was obvious what they were talking about, but neither of them cared.

“I need to sit down somewhere,” Will said. “Just to decompress.”

“I will be making the rounds if you need me,” Hannibal said as he let go of Will’s hand.

Will walked over to a quiet corner and sat down on the ground. He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. The sound of all the chatter faded as he did his best to relax.

His meditation was interrupted as he heard someone take a seat next to him. He opened his eyes to see Lady Alana Bloom.

“Sorry if I’m bothering you,” she said. “I just noticed how you had been acting today and wanted to make sure you were okay after all of this.”

“I’m more than okay,” Will said.

“Oh? What has brought your spirits up?” she asked, seemingly pretending as though she hadn’t seen him and Hannibal’s romantic entrance.

Will stopped to think for a moment, wondering if he should tell her the truth. Alana was different from the rest of the people he had met that day. She valued the truth, and she valued others’ well-being. He figured it could do no harm.

“It’s the moment you’ve all been waiting for,” Will said, fighting a smile. “I kissed him.”

“What chain of events led to that?” Alana asked.

“We went outside to talk,” Will said. “He said some things about lies and truths. I couldn’t stop thinking about how everyone at the banquet was probably talking about us at that very moment. I got angry because I felt like Hannibal didn’t understand what I was going through, being born into royalty and all. At one point we began talking about how I got here in the first place.”

“I hate to interrupt, but how did you get here?” she asked. “You don’t have to say if it’s too touchy. I know you skipped over the subject earlier.”

“We did meet in a tavern,” Will said with a sigh. “I caught him staring at me from across the bar and asked him why. He didn’t answer, just kept asking how I felt, or rather, telling me how I felt. It felt like he was inside my head. I quickly became very angry. He kept teasing me and eventually, I snapped. I hit him. He hit me. When I found out he was the king, I was terrified. I thought he was going to kill me, but they just threw me in the dungeon. The next day, I was summoned to have dinner and he presented me with this arrangement.”

“Wow…”Alana trailed off. “The king just spared you? Was it an act of mercy or did you have to do something to earn it?”

“That’s actually part of what we were arguing about,” Will said. “He said he offered me this deal because I interested him and he ‘saw potential in me’. I was furious when he refused to tell me what kind of potential, then he admitted he wasn’t even sure himself. I tried to leave after that, but he stopped me. I snapped. I was going to hit him, but I just couldn’t do it with him staring at me, unflinching. I tried so hard, but I couldn’t do it. That’s when it happened. I caved in and kissed him instead. It felt so good to finally have him.”

“I’m happy for you,” Alana said. There was a content moment of silence before Hannibal returned.

“Hello Lady Alana,” he said. He held out a hand to Will, who took it and stood. “Thank you for keeping William company. I hope you had a meaningful conversation.”

“We did,” Alana said. “It’s always nice to stay ahead of all those rumors. Now I know the truth. Have a good night, you two.”

With that, they parted ways. Will and Hannibal made their way to the doors undisturbed, walking down through the hallways to Will's room. They both sat on the bed.

"Despite the drama, I believe this banquet was a success," Hannibal said. "Would you agree?"

"I certainly got something good out of it," Will said.

"Be sure to get a good night's rest," Hannibal said. "We'll be embarking on a long journey."

"Where are we going?" Will asked. He had never left the kingdom.

"To the south, I have business with the king of Muskratrville."

"How long will it take to get there?" Will asked.

"No more than a day," Hannibal said.

Will wasn't sure how he felt about this. This kingdom was all he'd ever known. The world outside those walls was dangerous. He hoped they wouldn't run into anyone, lest he have to fight.

But spending so much time with Hannibal was appealing.

"I'll tell you more in the morning," Hannibal said before pulling Will in for a kiss. He then left the room, headed for his own.

Will changed out of his extravagant clothes and tucked himself into bed. He replayed the events of the night over and over again, always spending extra time on the kiss. He couldn't believe this was real. He didn't want to sleep, for he feared he would wake up to find out it was all a dream.

Are We There Yet?

Will was exhausted as he entered the great hall in the morning.

“Did you have trouble sleeping?” Hannibal asked. “Were you ruminating again?”

“Of course,” Will said. “I couldn’t stop thinking about…well, everything.”

“You may rest on the way to Muskratrville.” Hannibal said. “It is a somewhat smooth ride.”

“What business do you have there?” Will asked.

“I have a unique deal with the king,” Hannibal said. “Muskratrville is known for their fine meats, particularly pork. Our kingdom receives a discount of sorts in exchange for protection. Luckily, both of us have seen relative peace in the past decade. We are visiting to discuss our agreement.”

“Are we just going to leave the kingdom?” Will asked. “What if something happens?”

“We won’t be very long,” Hannibal said. “And as you should know, our military has an order of its own. I trust them to make decisions if there is conflict. Of course, I doubt anything will happen. We haven’t seen a significant attack in nearly a decade. However, the route we are taking to Muskratville has been known to be riddled with looters. Which is why I am going to return your sword.”

Will resisted the urge to do a little happy dance. He had missed his sword dearly.

They finished breakfast quickly. After they ate, bags were packed and preparations were made. The wagon was loaded up and Will, Hannibal, and two guards set on their way.

Will recognized the wagon as the same one he’d been tossed into when he was arrested. He remembered the bumpy ride, though it was much better than traveling on foot.

They packed food for three days, one extra in case they got stuck somewhere or needed to stop for repairs.

“Have you ever traveled, William?” Hannibal asked.

“No,” Will said, watching the landscape pass by. “Though I’ve gathered that it is quite boring and uncomfortable.”

“Unfortunately, it’s the best we can do,” Hannibal said. “There are no efficient water routes that would take us to Muskratville. You did not sleep well. Get your rest now. I will wake you if needed.”

Will leaned against Hannibal’s shoulder and closed his eyes. He felt Hannibal take his hand, not remembering much else as he fell asleep.

—

A few hours into their journey, Will felt Hannibal shake him awake. He opened his eyes to see the guards fighting a small group of men.

“They require your aid,” Hannibal said.

Will hopped out of the wagon and unsheathed his sword, joining the two guards. There were four enemies with various weapons. Axes, daggers, and swords came their way. Will clashed with the sword-wielding men, quickly disarming him by slashing at his carrying arm. The man backed away, another taking his place. This one carried an axe, swinging for the head. Will ducked before thrusting his sword into the man’s side. He doubled over, dropping his weapon before he fell to the ground. He looked over at the guards, who had also taken down their matches.

Breathing heavy, he sheathed his sword and climbed back into the wagon. Hannibal looked proud.

“I knew you could fight, but your swordsmanship is impressive,” Hannibal said. “You used the same move to disarm that man as I did to you in our sparring session all those weeks ago.”

Will hadn’t realized. That day was certainly memorable, but not necessarily the fighting portion. He mostly remembered staring into the jaws of an angry wolf.

“I never thanked you,” Will said. “For saving me. My arms were just about to give out when you tackled it. I didn’t even mind that you proceeded to fall on me.”

“If I had no self control, I would’ve taken that as an opportunity to kiss you,” Hannibal admitted. Will turned red as the autumn leaves. “But it was well worth the wait.”

“I'll say I’m not proud of most things I did and said when we stepped out,” Will said. “But I think I made the right choice in the end.”

The rest of the ride was peaceful, much to Will’s relief. As they entered Muskratville, their wagon was protected by extra guards as they made their way through the town. When they arrived at the castle, they were greeted by visiting nobles and staff. Flags of the royal arms lined the door, a wild boar kicking up onto its hind legs. Upon entering, they walked to the great hall, where the king sat at his throne. A woman stood quietly next to him.

“Hannibal,” he greeted them. “You’re late.”

“We ran into a bit of trouble along the way,” Hannibal said.

“I don’t like excuses,” Mason said. He then looked at Will. “What have you brought with you? A grungy little thing.”

Will already knew he wasn’t going to like this guy.

“This is my companion, Sir William Graham,” Hannibal said, masking his annoyance.

“I don’t remember allowing a plus one,” Mason said.

“It would be foolish of me to leave behind my most dedicated protector,” Hannibal said.

“How could he possibly protect you when he can’t protect himself?” Mason asked. “He has more scars on his body than I have swine.”

“He is a passionate fighter, not afraid to put his body on the line,” Hannibal said. He looked over at Will, who was starting to get angry.

“No matter what he is to you, he must not eavesdrop on this important conversation,” Mason said. “Margot, take him away to a spare room. He must be tired anyway.”

The woman walked over to Will, extending a hand. Will took it hesitantly and she led him out of the great hall.

“How long have you been serving the king?” She asked as they walked down the hall.

“About three months,” Will said, just now realizing how long it had been. “I was introduced to him over the summer. We weren’t exactly friends back then.”

“What were you?” Margot asked.

“We fought each other in a tavern,” Will said, laughing a little. He knew he could tell this story because he would likely never see Margot again.

“How long did you spend in the dungeon?” Margot asked.

“One night,” Will said. “I was summoned for dinner with him the next day. He made a deal with me: conditional freedom in exchange for my servitude and protection.”

“So you’re a servant and bodyguard,” Margot said. “Does he treat you well?”

“I no longer feel employed,” Will said. “He spoils me, in all honesty.”

“Did he give you that necklace?” She asked, gesturing to the gold pendant.

“Yeah, for the harvest banquet,” Will said, looking down at it. “It’s probably the most valuable thing I’ve ever owned.”

“He must value you in that case,” Margot suggested.

Will debated whether or not it was a good idea to tell Margot that he and Hannibal were together. She seemed much kinder than Mason. He figured she could do no harm.

“Hannibal and I…” he began. “We recently became romantically involved.”

“Oh, really?” Margot raised an eyebrow. “How did that happen?”

“I suspected his interest very early on,” Will explained. “I think this sat in the back of my mind, influencing my own thoughts, because I fell soon after I realized. We both let our

feelings fester for months, until the banquet yesterday."

"So this is fresh?" Margot asked.

"Yes," Will said. "Everyone there already thought we were together thanks to some rumors. All the gossip angered me, so he pulled me away to try to calm me down. We had an argument, and things nearly got physical on my part. But instead, I followed my true desires and kissed him. I no longer care about rumors."

"Servant, bodyguard, and lover," Margot said. "It's not a bad life. You get to live in the castle and you have someone who loves you. That's more than I have."

"If I can find someone, so can you," Will said.

"It's hard to believe when even those I call family treat me so terribly," Margot said.

"Mason?" Will guessed. "What has he done?"

"Where do I begin?" Margot sighed. "He often abuses his power to get what he wants. But the worst is his torture and execution methods."

"How does he do it?" Will asked, intrigued but terrified.

"He has trained his pigs to acquire a taste for human flesh," Margot said. "If you were to cross him, you may find yourself in the pen, left to die. For lighter offenses, it's rat torture or flogging. He's most fond of slow, painful deaths and mutilations."

"That's definitely cruel," Will said. "I committed petty treason and was spared. Hannibal is much more reasonable."

"Petty treason?" Margot asked.

"I didn't plot to overthrow the king or anything like that," Will said. "I just beat him up. I didn't know who he was at the time."

"Mason would've thrown you to the pigs," Margot said, sending a chill down Will's spine. He made a mental note to avoid Mason at all costs. Thankfully, Margot changed the subject. "So, you and His Majesty have only now become lovers. What do you want from this relationship?"

Will thought about it. He wasn't doing this for power or even to get out of his servitude. He really did love Hannibal. He wanted everything that a normal couple had, and more.

"I just want to be with him," Will said. "I can't explain it, but he's somehow everything I never knew I wanted."

"What did it feel like?" Margot asked. "Falling in love."

"It was confusing," Will said. "I couldn't make sense of my emotions. Eventually, I found myself daydreaming. Something vaguely romantic would happen and I'd replay it in my head

all night. This went on for a while, until the banquet. It felt like going through all of that again, but within a few hours instead of weeks."

"But what's the end goal?" Margot asked.

Will had to think about it. Did he have any expectations? He hadn't been in a serious relationship before. Sure, there was a girl he visited every day for a while around five years ago, but they rarely kissed, or even hugged. They mostly just talked. Will wanted so much more out of his relationship with Hannibal, but he couldn't put it into words.

"I don't know," he said, giving up on trying to express his true thoughts.

"You'll figure it out," Margot said. She paused for a moment as she stopped at a door. "You must be exhausted. Get some rest."

She left Will alone in his small room. The bed was extremely uncomfortable, but he'd slept on worse. He lay down and closed his eyes.

--

Will felt like he had been lying awake for hours, sleepless. He rolled from one side to the other, expecting it to be different. It never was.

Eventually, he gave up. He got out of bed and wandered out into the hallway. He figured moving around more could tire him out.

As he rounded the corner, he saw Hannibal sitting on a bench.

"You can't sleep either?" Will asked as he took a seat next to him.

"I have many important subjects buzzing around in my head," Hannibal said. 'They won't agree on a time to rest."

"I just can't stop thinking about the things Margot told me about Mason," Will said. "Did you know he feeds people to pigs?"

"I don't ask him about his execution methods," Hannibal said.

"He's guilty of plenty of terrible things," Will said. "If you did ask him, I'm sure he'd brag about it."

"William, lower your voice," Hannibal said. "You never know if someone may be close by."

As they talked, they were unaware of Mason's servant, Cordell, listening from around the corner.

Knight In Shining Plot Armor

Will trudged into the great hall for breakfast to find Hannibal and Mason already seated across from each other. Hannibal gestured for Will to sit next to him. When he did, Mason had a disgusted look on his face.

“You let your servants eat at the table?” Mason asked. Will shot him an angry look.

“I don’t consider him a servant,” Hannibal said. “Even if I did, he’d be the only one. Does that answer your question?”

“Did you not sleep well? Mason asked. “You seem cranky.”

“I am very protective of my close friends,” Hannibal said. “What you perceive as irritability is much more complex than that."

“Oh, I see what’s going on here,” Mason said with a grin. “You have a soft spot for this one. How long have you known each other in the biblical sense?”

Will looked at Hannibal, wondering how - or if - he would explain what had happened at the banquet. Maybe he’d just come up with a lie.

“Tomorrow marks five weeks of our arrangement,” Hannibal said.

“Will you celebrate?” Mason asked.

“We just had our harvest banquet,” Hannibal said. “It would be excessive.”

“No one said you had to throw a party,” Mason said. “Have a glass of wine, or two. See where things lead.”

He followed that with a wink. Will had a feeling more uncomfortable questions were coming, and he was right.

“Sir William, would you call yourself a giver?” Mason asked.

Will said nothing, but gave Mason a furious look.

“William has proven to me that he is willing to sacrifice his own life and body to protect me,” Hannibal said, twisting the statement into something palatable. “Is that not giving? Though, I supposed we have protected each other, so the honor is shared between us.”

“Interesting,” Mason said. “He doesn’t talk much, does he?”

“I talk when I have something to say,” Will said, crossing his arms.

“You’re a snappy one,” Mason said. “Watch your mouth or Carlo will give you a tour of the pig pen.”

How did Mason know that Will knew about the pigs? And where was Margot?

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of breakfast. Will was familiar with the sight of bread, fruits, and oats, though he missed the thick stew the knights often ate for breakfast. It wasn't great, but he always felt full.

He avoided Mason's eyes for the rest of the meal, though he did catch a glimpse of who he assumed was "Carlo" standing at the doorway, which he understood was a threat.

"See something shiny, Sir Graham?" Mason asked through a mouthful of cranberries. "You have a long journey ahead. Eat."

"We will be traveling until sundown," Hannibal said. "In the past, I've gotten home just in the nick of time," Hannibal said. "We will need to leave within the hour. Will, once you're done, you can wait in the wagon if you'd like. Mason and I will continue our business conversation for a short while."

ANYTHING to get away from Mason. Will finished his food rather quickly, but not so fast that anyone would notice.

He was about to excuse himself when it hit him. If Mason was willing to throw him to the pigs over an offensive tone, he was afraid of what may have happened to the princess.

"I'd like to say goodbye to Margot," Will said. "Where is she?"

"Wouldn't you like to know…" Mason said as he too finished his meal. "She likes to relax in damp and dark places, but I couldn't tell you where she goes because I couldn't care less."

"Just go to the wagon, William," Hannibal said.

Will got up and left the great hall, thankful that the doors were shut so they couldn't see him, because he wasn't going to the cart. He was going to find Margot.

Damp and dark. It sounded a lot like the dungeon Will had spent the night in not too long ago.

The castle grounds were laid out in a familiar fashion to Hannibal's, so he took an educated guess on the location. The dungeon was indeed damp and dark, lit only by torches. Each cell was outfitted with various torture devices, but Will knew there was more to it than whips and shackles.

At the very end of the corridor, Will found Margot sitting in a cell, looking more bored than anything else.

"Margot," he said quietly. She turned her head to face him.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, standing to meet him at the bars. "If one of the guards find you, they'll-"

Suddenly Will felt the force of a large stone being thrown at his head. His world went dark as he hit the ground.

—

Will woke up suspended in the air, unable to move. He looked down to see not only the ropes tied around him, but he could also hear the squealing pigs gathered in a pen behind him. He felt a chill down his spine and he realized what was going on.

“Sir William Graham,” Mason Verger greeted him. “I must say, you’re much more enjoyable to be around when you’re unconscious.”

Soon, Hannibal was escorted in by two guards, Carlo and Matteo. He wasn’t bound. In fact, Mason even handed him a knife.

“Your beloved servant has broken my laws,” Mason said. “Gossip about the king will not be tolerated.

“It’s not gossip if it’s true,” Will said. “She told me you feed people to your pigs. Look at what you’re doing right now.”

“I can’t stand this thing,” Mason sighed. “Hannibal, prove your allyship. Cut his throat, but don’t let him bleed out. Just a little nick. Just enough to give the pigs a taste of it.”

Hannibal slowly brought the knife to Will’s neck. He could see the confusion and sadness in Will’s eyes. He would never do this, not even to preserve a decades-long trade agreement.

He brought the knife down and cut the thin, low-quality ropes that had been used to tie up Will. Will fell from his hanging position. Upon landing he ducked a high kick from Carlo. As he came back up, he watched Hannibal stab the knife into his neck. Matteo managed to knock Hannibal down, but soo received a jab to his thigh. Foolishly, he removed the knife, causing blood to gush out of the wound.

“Shouldn’t have done that,” Hannibal said. He stood and turned to Will. “We need to leave.”

“One more thing,” Will said, slowly walking towards Mason, who stood with a shit-eating grin on his face. As Will got closer, it morphed into fear and anger.

“You would dare assault a king?!” he exclaimed, beginning to back away. What he failed to notice was another pig pen close behind him.

“I’ve done it before,” Will said before shoving Mason backwards into the pen. He didn’t even wait to see what would happen. He and Hannibal just ran.

As they rushed back to the wagon a few guards seemed to realize something was wrong, but they didn’t chase them. They ran back towards where Mason was likely being eaten alive by his own swine.

“What’s with the rush?” one of their guards asked as they got back to the wagon.

“We no longer have a trade deal with Muskratville,” Hannibal said as he climbed into the wagon and helped Will do the same. As they rode away, they both wondered what would happen to Mason Verger.

--

As they slaughtered the pigs and pulled his body from the pen, Mason groaned in pain. His hands were mutilated and his face would no doubt be disfigured after the pigs had taken their share.

They carried him on a board to the infirmary, where Cordell wrapped him up with bandages, inspecting his limbs and appendages to take inventory. He was missing two whole fingers on his left hand and three on the right. They also took a few chunks out of his arms and legs. His feet were protected by his thick leather shoes, but his face did not share the luxury.

Cordell did not allow him to see his face until it was covered in bandages. Mason could tell that his nose was mostly eaten from the flatness of his profile.

“I will do the best I can to ensure your wounds heal attractively,” Cordel said as he cleaned up his supplies. “For now, you must get rest.”

“I’ll get my revenge against Graham if it’s the last thing I do,” Mason muttered before drifting off to sleep.

--

The journey back home started off frantic, but quickly quieted down. There were no interruptions this time. But due to their delayed departure, the sun began to set upon them.

“There’s an inn just beyond this hill,” Hannibal said as they drove up a gentle slope. “I did not predict the events of this morning, so I didn’t bring much money at all, but we should still have enough to get a roof over our heads.”

They continued, now descending. Will could see the inn about 100 feet away in the valley. They slowed as they approached it. When they arrived, they all hopped out of the wagon and one of the guards tied their two horses to a post. Upon entering the inn, they were greeted by a shy-looking man at the front counter.

“Welcome to the Craber Inn,” he said. “My name is Peter. How can I help you?”

“How many rooms can we get for this,” Hannibal said, placing his money on the counter. Peter began counting it. He then checked a piece of paper.

“I’d say that’s three rooms with some change,” Peter said, walking to get the keys. However, another man stopped him, pulling him away.

“How much do we charge?” the other man asked.

“One per head,” Peter said, slightly afraid of this man.

“No,” the other man said. Then, inaudible to the customers, “These men are rich. I can tell the high quality of their clothing from here. It’s two.”

The man pushed Peter in a backroom and walked up to the counter with the money.

“Sorry for the inconvenience,” he said. “We recently made some improvements, so pricing has changed. My name is Clark. How may we help you today?”

“We need however many rooms that money can get us,” Hannibal said, gesturing towards the coins on the counter. Clark counted it up quickly, then seemed to do math in his head.

“That’s enough for two rooms, or if you’re frugal, two beds in one room and you get a quarter of it back,” Clark said. “What’ll it be?”

Hannibal thought about it. If there were only two beds, he and Will would share, as would the two guards. He’d rather have privacy.

“We’ll take the two rooms,” he said.

“Excellent,” Clark said, scooping up the coins. “Peter, show them to their - AH!”

No one knew why Clark was shouting until they saw Peter pick up a rat and cradle it in his arms.

“I told you to get rid of that thing!” Clark yelled.

“But Kevin is nice,” Peter said quietly. “He’s never hurt anybody.”

“Just…Just put it away,” Clark said, frustrated. He then put on his best customer service voice. “Sorry about that. Allow me to show you to your rooms.”

He led them down a hallway to a wooden door.

“Room number one,” he said, holding up the key. Hannibal motioned for the guards to take it. Clark then took them a few doors down. It was noticeably colder. “Room number two.”

Hannibal took the key and unlocked the door. It was very small inside, with a bed not unlike the one in Will’s room at the castle. It wasn’t very wide, about four feet. Will looked up at him before sitting on the edge.

“That guy Clark bumped the price up for us,” he said as he took off his shoes.

“Yes, I know,” Hannibal said, doing the same. “He’s not worth the trouble. I’m sure you’re tired. Get in bed.”

Will crawled into bed, lying on his back. Hannibal soon joined him, pulling the blanket over them both. Will wasn’t sure if he felt extra cozy or he was sweating from nerves. He turned to face Hannibal and found he had done the same. Almost instinctively, Will draped an arm around his waist and pulled him in close, feeling Hannibal do the same.

He could get used to this. Maybe not the almost-getting-eaten-by-pigs part, but this.

Oh My God, They Were Roommates!

Will woke up still tucked away in Hannibal's arms. He didn't particularly want to move, but he knew that Hannibal would be getting up soon. He carefully removed himself, beginning to put on his shoes. Not long after, he looked over to find Hannibal doing the same.

"We don't have too much further to travel," he said. "However, I would like to leave as early as we can, seeing as we're already late. I really ought to punish you for the mess you made."

"But?" Will swallowed a lump in his throat.

"I never liked Mason," Hannibal said. "I despised him, to be truthful. But we benefited greatly from our trade deal. It's a shame the price of meat may rise, but Mason had it coming. He had always been disgustingly rude."

"He treated me like a peasant," Will said. "If it weren't for you, I would've had to eat my breakfast off the floor.

"We'll, he won't be bothering us again," Hannibal said.

Once they had all woken up and changed into fresh clothes, Will, Hannibal, and the guards walked down the hall to return their keys.

"Not staying for breakfast?" Peter asked.

"Unfortunately we are running late as it is," Hannibal said. "But tell Clark that King Hannibal Lecter VIII said hello."

Peter's eyes lit up.

"You're the king of Labinnac!" he exclaimed before realizing he should probably be more low key about it. He lowered his voice. "I've never even met a duke, and definitely not a royal. I hope your stay was okay."

"It was perfectly fine," Hannibal assured him. He glanced at Will. "Nice and warm."

"That's good," Peter said. "I hope you find your way safely."

"Thank you, Peter," Will said before they left the inn. As they all boarded the wagon, he spoke again. "How much farther would you say this place is from the kingdom?"

"About twenty more miles," Hannibal said. "It shouldn't take long."

"That's not too bad," Will said. "What's on the schedule after that?"

"I must attend a few meetings," Hannibal said. "We will be just in time for my conversation with the Council. I normally offer you leisure at that time, but I would like for you to join me today."

Will had never seen the inner workings of the government. He reckoned it could be interesting to sit in on one of these meetings.

—

Hannibal and Will entered the meeting room. The small group of men who had been chatting quickly quieted down.

“Welcome back, Your Majesty,” one of them said.

“William, this is my military strategist, Lord Jack Crawford,” Hannibal said, gesturing towards his right-hand man. Jack stood to shake Will’s hand.

“It’s a pleasure to have you join us,” Jack said. “I’ve heard great things.”

Will bit his tongue, but shot Hamninal a look that read seriously? Talking about me again? He then took a seat next to Hannibal.

“As someone who once lived flush with the outer wall, William knows what conflicts we face on a regular basis,” Hannibal said. “I thought perhaps you should hear it from the man himself rather than listen to my retelling.”

“I’m very interested in what he has to offer,” Jack said. “Let’s start with your visit to Muskratville. How was your conversation with King Mason Verger?”

“We had more than a conversation,” Hannibal said. He then turned to Will. “William, would you like to share what happened? All of it, from your point of view.”

Will felt a dozen pairs of curious eyes on him. He wasn’t a huge fan of being the center of attention in this manner, especially when he was delivering bad news.

“Upon arriving, I was immediately insulted by the king,” Will began. “He sent me away with the Princess, Margot. She told me all about Mason and his cruelty, including his use of man-eating pigs as an execution method. The next morning, she was absent from the breakfast table. Mason continued to be unbelievably rude. When Hannibal excused me to return to the wagon, I instead found my way to the dungeon, where I visited the Princess. She was punished for merely speaking ill of her brother. Next thing I knew, I was knocked unconscious by one of Mason’s guards.”

“Where did you wake up?” Jack asked.

“I found myself tied up and suspended by a rope over the pig pen. Mason was going to feed me to them.”

“Where was Hannibal?” another Council member asked.

“Mason was going to make Hannibal slit my throat before they dropped me in, just to give the pigs a taste. This was a test of loyalty. But instead, He cut me free and killed the two guards that tried to apprehend us. Before leaving, I knew I had some unfinished business with Mason, so I shoved him into the pig pen.”

“In short, I believe we have broken our trade agreement and likely made a new enemy,” Hannibal said.

“If King Mason survived, we most certainly have a new enemy,” Jack said. “Hannibal, you told us that Will had initially assaulted you, but not that this would become a trend.”

“What William did to me in the summer is much different from the punishment he gave Mason,” Hannibal. “With me, it was personal, his treatment of Mason was fueled by his righteous anger.”

“Let’s just hope that Mason doesn’t send his armies our way in the spring,” Jack said. “What are your plans if that happens?”

“We send out our best to defeat them,” Hannibal said.

“Does that include Sir Graham?” Jack asked. “You have said in the past that he is an excellent swordsman.”

Hannibal didn’t want to think about what could happen if Will were to return to the battlefield. But if Jack believed he was needed, he’d have no choice.

“I’d prefer that it not come down to that,” he said. “William will stay by my side, protecting me.”

“I suppose that is a fine use of his abilities,” Jack said, unsatisfied. “But if we face any threats and need more men, you have to let him fight, especially if they breach the castle.”

Hannibal looked at Will, who looked back at him.

“I say this because we are severely overdue for an attack from the north,” Jack said. “The last Danegeld was nearly two years ago.”

“I've been trying to contact the king and form a truce of sorts,” Hannibal said. “He’s not very willing to negotiate, but we may be able to establish a trade deal to replace our near yearly payment to those savages.”

“Lose one deal, gain another,” Jack said. “Is that how it goes?”

“In these times, yes,” Hannibal said.

“You’re playing with fire, Your Majesty,” Jack said. “When Muskratville invaded thirty years ago, we lost hundreds of men. Surely you remember what happened.”

“I assure you, that will not happen again,” Hannibal said. He seemed disturbed by Jack’s comment about the invasion.

“You say that, but do you believe it?” Jack asked. “I’m not doubting you. I’m just imagining the worst so we can prepare for it. Say Mason’s men infiltrate the castle, only after killing every civilian in their path. What’s your plan?”

“I will fight,” Hannibal said. Jack was silent. “Now, I believe we’ve discussed what matters. William and I must be on our way.”

Hannibal took Will’s hand and led him to the gardens. They sat on their bench, closer than they used to.

“William, what Lord Jack Crawford said is true,” Hannibal said. “War will be coming. Whether it be the north or Muskratville, we must be ready. If and when the time comes, I will be there by your side.”

“It’s not even winter,” Will said. “We at least have until the spring. Armies don’t like the cold.”

“That is correct,” Hannibal said. “But the spring will sneak up on us like a wolf to a lamb. We must be prepared, physically and mentally.”

“I’m always ready,” Will said. “As long as I have my sword, I can fight.”

“You are too eager, William,” Hannibal. “There must be that sliver of fear to remind you why you’re fighting.”

“You don’t think I’m afraid?” Will asked. “I’m terrified. I’m afraid because battle is a force of separation. We could very easily lose each other.”

“I will not let us get separated when an army attacks,” Hannibal said, placing a hand on Will’s cheek. “I won’t let anyone take you from me.”

They sat in content silence until supper, where they made small talk, avoiding the topic of war looming over their heads. After their meal, they both walked to Will’s room.

“Why are you here?” Will asked.

“To help transport your belongings,” Hannibal said. “You will be staying with me now.”

“Oh…” Will trailed off. He pulled a bag out from under the bed. “Should I just grab everything and we’ll decide what I actually need later?”

“If that’s how you would like to go about it, yes,” Hannibal said before beginning to neatly fold Will’s clothes. They had been folded already, just not up to code.

Once all of his things were moved, the sun had begun to set and storm clouds rolled in. Rather than sitting on the bench in the gardens as usual, Hannibal and Will sat in front of Hannibal’s window on two ledges that sat perpendicular to the wall so that the two men were facing each other. It soon began to rain.

“The rain reminds me of falling in love,” Hannibal said, resting a hand on Will’s knee. “It starts as a drizzle, just a curiosity. Sometimes, it can suddenly turn into a torrential downpour.”

“Is that what happened to you?” Will asked, placing his hand over Hannibal’s.

“I was struck by it, thunder booming in my ears as I recovered from a punch,” Hannibal said, looking at Will. “The storm of hostility somehow managed to coexist with the gentle rain of affection when I met you.”

“Mine was more like intermittent showers,” Will said, remembering his first week there. “I just couldn’t make sense of what was forming in the clouds.”

“And now?” Hannibal asked.

“I don’t think it’ll ever stop,” Will said. “I’ll be swept away in a flood.”

“I won’t let you drown,” Hannibal assured him, then looked back out the window.

They sat and watched the sun set, occasionally stealing glances at one another. When the sky was pitch black, the curfew bell rang throughout the town. It was time to settle down and go to bed.

Hannibal tucked himself under the wool blanket, inviting Will to do the same. He extinguished the oil lamp on his bedside table and laid down, turning to face Will. Will’s eyelids were already beginning to droop. He must have been exhausted from the events of that morning. Hannibal pulled him in close as it poured rain outside and in his heart.

Give It Up For Chapter Fifteen!

Chapter Notes

> You may have noticed I edited the relationship tags... let's just say I reworked the second half of this fic to include an Alana/Margot subplot, starting with Margot's escape from Verger Hell(tm). Originally Margot was just a cameo for the Muskratville chapter, but she deserves better so I GAVE her better. It's something I wanted to do when I first wrote the fic years ago, but was too scared to actually attempt because it would make everything more complicated. But I'm not a coward anymore >:)

It had been nearly two months since the dreadful day Will Graham shoved him into the pigpen, but Mason Verger was still seething. He often took out this anger on his sister, Margot, only letting her out of the dungeon so he could berate her.

“You may as well have pushed me in yourself,” he grumbled.

“But I didn’t,” Margot said. “You brought this upon yourself, Mason. You chose to react.”

“If you hadn’t opened your rotten mouth, we wouldn’t be here,” Mason snapped. “In fact, I don’t want you here anymore.”

“I’m all you have,” Margot said. “Do you think Cordell will keep order in your kingdom while you recover?”

“He’d certainly do a better job than you,” Mason said.

“If I leave, I will never come back,” Margot warned. “You will reminisce on my time in this castle and think to yourself: Why didn’t she stay?”

“Yeah, sure,” Mason scoffed. “Go cry to Sir Graham. You were quite fond of him. You know he’s taken, right?”

This gave Margot a fabulous idea. If she was going to leave, she knew exactly where to go. She knew exactly what she was going to do and say, and to whom.

“You want to kill him, right?” Margot said, softening her voice.

“I want my armies to storm the castle and bring me Hannibal and William, and I want them alive,” Mason said. “I will torture them both to death… William first.”

“But you cannot travel so far with an army in the winter,” Margot said.

“I know that,” Mason said. “We attack in the spring. I planned it that way. Unlike you, I am not a half-wit.”

Margot resisted the urge to absolutely roast Mason like a whole hog on a spit. She knew better than to do that, lest she end up on the hit list herself. However, she did want to anger Mason just enough so that he would truly want her gone.

“If it weren’t for your face, one could say you have beauty and brains,” she said with a smirk. “Mason, who do you think is going to rule after you die? You’ve yet to find a woman oblivious enough to marry you, much less produce an heir.”

“It certainly won’t be you sitting on the throne,” Mason muttered. “Cordell, get rid of her. I never want to see this wretched creature again.”

“I’ll gladly leave on my own accord,” Margot said, evading Cordell’s grasp.

She quickly ran up to her room, where she had already packed a bag for an emergency evacuation. Living with Mason, the possibility of needing to run away was very high, so she had always been prepared. Inside, she kept valuable pieces of jewelry that she would have to sell to fund her journey. This included a beautiful golden ruby ring that her mother had given her before her death. She hated to let go of it, but being free from Mason was worth far more.

Since it was absolutely frigid outside, she threw on a heavy cloak before sneaking out of the castle. She vowed to never look back, even as she heard Mason shouting at his servants from his room.

She was grateful to have been exiled in the morning, for this gave her plenty of time to find a place to stay. There was an inn not too far from the outer walls of Muskratville. That was her goal.

--

Things were wonderful in the castle. Hannibal and Will were happier than ever. There was no trouble in the kingdom, nor arguments between the two. They just frolicked in the gardens all day like little squirrels on a college campus.

However, it was getting much colder, as December brought freezing temperatures to the region. Most of all, it brought snow.

Will awoke to a cold draft hitting the arm that had found its way out of the blankets. He groaned as the sun shone directly into his eyes through the window.

“Good morning, my Sleeping Beauty,” Hannibal said, already fully dressed. He walked over to Will and planted a kiss on his forehead. “You must get up. We have plenty of enjoyable things to do today.”

Like the drama queen he was, Will pulled the blanket over his head in protest.

“If you don’t get out of bed, I’ll take away your sword privileges again,” Hannibal threatened. He laughed as Will suddenly came to life. “Be sure to dress for snow. We are

heading out today, despite the weather."

"Snow?" Will asked. Hannibal directed him towards the window, where he saw the entire kingdom dusted with fresh powdery snow. He made a sour face. "I hate snow."

"Why is that?" Hannibal asked.

"Have you ever been running at your sparring partner and suddenly slipped on a patch of ice?" Will asked. "I have. Everyone laughed at me and it hurt… a LOT."

"Well, we won't be sparring in the snow, my dear William," Hannibal assured him. "I would like to experience the wintertime with my friends. You are familiar with them."

Ah, yes. The Gossip Squad.

Oh, and Alana. Alana was cool. Much cooler than the rest of them in Will's opinion.

Excited only to see Alana, Will quickly got dressed, layering up to ensure he didn't have to huddle for warmth with Hannibal. As much as he would love to, he couldn't let Freddie or Chilton see that.

They both donned their cloaks, taking a quick morning snack from the kitchen to-go. They ventured out into the cold, hand-in-hand, until they reached the inner square. It seemed as though they were late because everyone else was already waiting.

"Hello Will," Alana said, then bowing to Hannibal, "and Your Majesty."

"This isn't fair," Chilton said, crossing his arms. "You can't bring a knight to a friendly neighborhood snowball fight!"

"Snowball fight?" Will asked, turning to Hannibal.

"Once per year, my friends and I like to have a little childish fun," Hannibal explained. "I'm sure you're familiar with the concept."

"Oh, I am," Will said with a chuckle. "I think it's funny that your friends believe I will be playing on your team."

"What?" Hannibal looked confused. Before he could say another word, Will was packing together snow to draw first blood. He threw it softly, but it did hit Hannibal directly in the face.

All of Hannibal's friends erupted in laughter, even Bedelia, who was usually quite mature.

"That one was just a teaser," Will said. However, his smiling face turned to fear as Hannibal began gathering his first snowball.

"Run, Sir William!" Chilton shouted.

So he did. Will ran and hopped over a shallow wall to hide, but it was no use, as Hannibal easily followed him.

Will continued to weave in and out of alleyways until he made one data mistake: he tripped, on a log of all things. He face-planted directly into a pile of fresh snow.

He was picking himself up as Hannibal turned the corner. He wasn't even mad when he felt a snowball hit his back.

"Kicking me while I'm down," he joked, pulling himself to his feet.

"The others play even dirtier," Hannibal warned. "Come, let's rejoin them."

What then ensued was one of the most brutal snowball fights Will had ever partaken in. No one was safe, not even the poor old woman who was just trying to cross the street when Chilton hit her square in the jaw.

Will took this as an opportunity to take out his frustrations in a harmless way. He mostly played defense, but when a memory popped up that he didn't like…well, you can guess what happened next.

"This one's for telling the jesters Hannibal and I were fucking!" he shouted as he hurled one at Freddie.

"You're not helping your case, Graham," Freddie laughed. "The fact that you still dwell on that means you want it."

She then dodged the fastest snowball ever recorded in human history.

"He's got quite the arm!" Chilton exclaimed. "Lady Fredericka, I suggest you find cover."

"You're not in the clear either," Will said, pointing to Chilton.

"But Sir Graham, I do suggest you look behind you," Chilton said with a smirk.

Will turned around to see Hannibal with a snowball the size of a honey baked ham, ready to bring it down on his head. He surrendered to his fate, blocking some of the impact with his forearms. However, he was still covered in snow by the end.

"You mustn't fall for our tricks, William," Hannibal said. "Conme, let's go inside. Everyone is invited. I'll start a fire."

The group migrated indoors to the relative warmth of the castle. Hannibal indeed lit the logs in the great hall's fireplace, leading Will to sit in front.

"Does anyone fancy a warm drink?" Hannibal asked. "Follow me to the kitchen."

Freddie, Chilton, and Alana followed, but Bedelia stayed behind to speak with Will.

“I’m sure you wonder why we engage in such immaturity on occasions such as these,” she said.

“It’s a little strange for the nobility, but rowdy knights play games every day,” Will said.

“We encourage His Majesty to reclaim his childhood,” Bedelia said. “And before you ask, none of us can tell you what happened to him in his youth. You must seek answers from the man himself.”

Will looked over at Hannibal, who was talking with Alana in another corner.

“I didn’t have the most enjoyable childhood either,” Will said.

“Hannibal has given me clues about that,” Bedelia said. “He says you are stubborn as a mule, but not necessarily in a bad way.”

“I’m always interested in how he speaks of me,” Will said.

“He truly loves you,” Bedelia said. “Even before the banquet, he would come to me and swoon over his mysterious love interest. He just thought you were one of the most beautiful people he had ever been blessed to meet. Even though you were rough on the inside, he saw a sweetness in you.”

“I still struggled to understand what he saw in the beginning,” Will said. “I was quite mean to him when we met. I was even angry with him at the banquet.”

“He saw through the walls you built around yourself,” Bedelia said. “You don’t like to let people in, do you?”

“No, not at all,” Will said. “But he snuck in somehow. Now, I don’t mind, but it frustrated me in the beginning. I didn’t like the feeling that he was reading my thoughts. I don’t think anybody would.”

“Hannibal is very similar,” Bedelia said. “But for you, I think he will open up.”

--

Margot trudged through the snowstorm, praying she was going the right direction. The hem of her dress was soaked, weighing her down, but she continued until she saw the light she was looking for.

She made her way to the building as quickly as possible and thanked the heavens when she was finally inside.

“Welcome to the Craber Inn!” Peter said. “How can I help you today?”

“I need a room,” Margot said. She then fished out a gold chain from her bag. “Can this get me through the storm?”

“Let me ask my boss,” Peter said, retrieving Clark. He walked over and examined the chain.

“And who do you think you are?” Clark asked.

“Princess Margot of Muskratville,” she said, removing her hood.

“A princess!” Clark exclaimed sarcastically. “Surely you must deserve the very best!”

“I really just need somewhere to stay until the storm clears,” Margot said.

“Why are you traveling alone, Princess?” Clark asked. “Isn’t that dangerous? King Mason would never allow that.”

“You don’t know him like I do,” Margot said. “In fact, I’m running away from him. It’s a long story, but I’ll tell you if you let me stay.”

“Okay, Scheherazade,” Clark said with a smirk. “Let’s sit down and sort this out.”

They walked over to a small sitting area by a humble fireplace.

“So,” Clark said. “What made you run away from Muskratville?”

“It all began in October,” Margot said. “The king of Labinnac and his companion, Sir William Graham, had come to visit. His Majesty was to discuss the existing trade deal, while I kept Will company. I told him some things I shouldn’t have, and word got around to Mason. Next thing I know, I’m in the dungeon.”

“What did you say that was so bad?” Peter asked.

“I told Will the truth about Mason’s pigs,” Margot said. “I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors about him feeding prisoners to the swine. Well, it’s true.”

“How did you escape the dungeon?” Clark asked.

“Mason had no choice but to let me out, for I had to help take care of him after Will Graham pushed him into a pig pen.”

The men both made sour faces, imagining the king being eaten alive.

“He survived, but he is horribly disfigured,” Margot continued. “He was under the constant care of myself and his most trusted servant. He took out his anger at Will on me, and I finally decided I had enough, so I left.”

“What a lovely story,” Clark said. “I suppose we can let you ride out the storm here, but don’t expect luxury. Many rooms have already been filled.”

“Like I said, I just need shelter,” Margot said.

“Peter, show her to a room,” Clark ordered.

“Follow me, Princess,” Peter said. He led her down the hall to the very last room. “My apologies if it’s chilly in here. Many have complained about that in the past, but it’s one of

the few rooms we have left."

When he opened the door, a rat came crawling out. Margot did not react, as she had seen plenty in the dungeon.

"There you are, Kevin!" Peter said, picking up the rat and cradling it in his arms. "Sorry, he likes to explore sometimes."

"Kevin and I are alike in that sense," Margot said with a smile. She sat down on the bed, leaving her heavy bag on the floor. "This room will be fine, thank you."

"And what would you like for dinner, Princess?" Peter asked. "We're serving beef and vegetable stew, but I can put in a special request for the chef."

"The stew sounds wonderful after the journey I've had," Margot said.

"Alright," Peter said. "Well, make sure to get plenty of rest while you're here." He paused. "May I ask where you're going?"

Margot hesitated. Did she want to share her plans? She figured Mason would be able to track her down regardless.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend," she said. "Mason has promised war on Labinnac, and I intend to give them fair warning."

"I'm that case, you can stay here as long as you need to," Peter said with a smile.

S&M By Rhianna But It's Not Sexy At All

Chapter Notes

> This chapter contains extremely graphic violence/depictions of torture. If this makes you uncomfortable, skip to this line: “'Wake up,' he demanded, pouring water over his face.”
>
> TG;DR (too gross; didn’t read): Will has a nightmare that he is being tortured to death by Mason Verger. Will probably make your skin crawl.

Will opened his eyes to complete darkness. He didn’t know where he was, but it certainly wasn’t a bed. He could feel restraints pulling on his limbs, rubbing his wrists raw as he attempted to free himself.

“Struggling will only make this take longer,” a voice said from the void. He recognized it as Mason Verger.

In a flash, the king of Muskratville stood over him, his face horribly disfigured. In his hand, he held a small knife.

“The pigs have been waiting for you, Sir, Graham,” he said. “But I will not allow them to kill you so easily. No, I intend to feed them every piece of you, as long as you will live.”

Without warning, Will felt the knife slice down his right forearm, taking a sheet of flesh with it. He screamed, but no sound came out. He could not alert anyone to his suffering. He could only watch as Mason threw his skin into a pen of hungry pigs, who swarmed around it. This continued until the muscles and tendons in Will’s arm were fully exposed.

He couldn’t bear to look at it. He fooled himself into believing that what he didn’t see couldn’t hurt him. However, this was not the case. His entire arm was on fire, radiating heat through his shoulder and chest.

As soon as he thought it couldn’t get any worse, he felt the skin peel away from his right leg.

The pain was becoming too much to bear. Exposed nerves erupted into flame as the cold air brushed past. Soon enough, all of his limbs burned in this manner. Every slight movement felt like dipping into a vat of acid. Will wished he could just bleed out to end his suffering.

He was hopeful for the release of death as he felt faint, but Mason quickly took care of that.

“Wake up,” he demanded, pouring water over his face.

Will suddenly shot up, no longer in the torture chamber. Thankfully, he found himself back in bed. Hannibal sat at his side, one hand nudging his shoulder.

“William, talk to me,” he said. “What happened?”

“I… I had a nightmare,” Will said, his voice shaking. He felt around to make sure his skin was still intact.

“About what?” Hannibal asked, resting his other hand on Will’s leg.

“Mason,” was all Will could manage.

“As far as we know, Mason is dead,” Hannibal said. “You pushed him into his own pig pen. No man could survive that.”

“What if he did?” Will asked, tracing the area on his arm where the knife would cut.

“I won’t let him have you,” Hannibal said. “I promise you there is nothing to fear.”

“Of course you would say that,” Will said. “You don’t seem to feel much fear of anything.”

“William, I assure you that I fear the same outcomes as you,” Hannibal said, running his fingers through Will’s hair. “I learned from a very young age that I cannot show these emotions, as I could easily be taken advantage of in a state of weakness.”

“Am I weak for being afraid?” Will asked.

“Not at all,” Hannibal assured him. “You have a high threshold. The fact that you are afraid means that the threat is serious.”

Will sat in silence for a moment, shivering at the thought of going back to sleep.

“William, would you like to take a walk to get your mind off of it?” Hannibal asked. Will nodded.

The two quietly got out of bed and slipped on their shoes. They then began to slowly make their way down the hall, hand-in-hand.

Will’s hands were clammy, but he still clung to Hannibal like a child who had previously gotten lost in Walmart would cling to their mother. He was afraid that if they got separated, something terrible would happen.

“Shall we talk about what may be causing these nightmares?” Hannibal asked. “I have reason to believe this will not be the only one. Have you had others that you did not tell me about?”

“I’ve had strange dreams of us being torn from each other by some unstoppable force,” Will admitted. “I guess it finally got me. Now it’s time to pay the price for what I’ve done.”

“You may not have done the right thing,” Hannibal said, “but you certainly revealed to me that my alliance with Muskratville was immoral.”

“Were the man-eating pigs not enough?” Will asked.

“Our kingdom has its own dark past with executions and torture,” Hannibal said. “I chose not to judge Mason for being a little behind in terms of his morals. Information travels slowly, if at all. Though, he is the type to ignore information that challenges his current views. He would rather shoot the messenger. He’s stubborn, but not in the same way you are.”

“I’m only stubborn if it is to preserve things that are good in my life,” Will said. “At least, that’s what I tell myself.”

“You’re more like his sister, Margot,” Hannibal said. “Determined.”

Suddenly, there was a commotion down the hall. It sounded like a woman shouting at the entrance to the castle. She was struggling.

“Come, we must see what this is,” Hannibal said, leading Will towards the noise.

What they saw was not too dissimilar to what they heard. A tattered-looking woman was being held back by two guards as she shouted at them.

“Let me go! I am royalty!”

Her voice sounded familiar.

“Margot…” Will whispered. He then ran over to her. “Princess! Are you okay? What happened?”

Hannibal obviously made the same connection as he joined Will by Margot’s side and ordered the guards to free her.

“Princess, why have you traveled all this way?” he asked.

“I had to get away from Mason,” she said, voice trembling from the cold. “And I had to warn you. He’s coming in the spring, and he will show no mercy.”

“Come, let me show you to a room,” Hannibal said. “We can discuss this in the morning, but you need rest. We all do.”

--

Breakfast was incredibly awkward. Will did not get a wink of sleep after returning to bed. He laid with his head on Hannibal’s chest, listening to his heartbeat as Hannibal stroked his hair. Soon enough, Hannibal fell asleep, but Will’s eyes were wide open until sunrise. He knew Hannibal could tell.

Margot, on the other hand, had promptly passed out as soon as her head hit the pillow. She was given fresh clothes that morning.

“Margot, if you wouldn’t mind, I would like a more detailed explanation of why you are here,” Hannibal said.

“Like I told you, I needed to escape Mason,” she said. “He was taking his anger out on me, and I couldn’t stand it any longer. I’m sure if he had been able to get out of bed, he would torture me, but he had to use his words instead. The verbal abuse was intolerable, so I left.”

“So he really is alive?” Will asked, his face going pale.

“He just barely survived,” Margot said with a sigh. She noticed that Will’s face was white as a sheet, and that Hannibal had discreetly taken his hand under the table. She could tell something was wrong, but she didn’t want to pry.

“Why did you come here?” Hannibal asked, changing the subject. “It’s such a long journey on foot.”

“I knew I would be safe here, so long as I condemned my brother,” Margot explained. “I also wanted to help you prepare for the invasion we all know is coming. He wants revenge, and he will not stop until he gets it.”

Hannibal felt Will squeeze the life out of his hand.

“Margot, my dearest apologies, but we must move away from this topic of conversation,” Hannibal said. “You can meet with my council to discuss the threat.”

“I’m sorry if it’s not appropriate for the table,” Margot said. “Why don’t we talk about how things have been going here? How are you two?”

“We have our days, but I believe William and I are happier than ever,” Hannibal said.

“You know, Will told me how you two met,” Margot said. “I think it’s very sweet. You gave him a second chance after he wronged you, and you fell in love with each other. Do either of you have any regrets?”

Will thought about it. He wished he had controlled his anger in the tavern, but at the same time, he wondered whether he would have ever seen Hannibal again if they hadn’t fought.

“I don’t think we went about things the correct way, but in a weird way, I’m glad I punched him,” Will said.

“Your fire is what attracted me to you,” Hannibal said. “If it hadn’t been for that fight, you could have escaped my affections.”

“Good to know I’m trapped,” Will said with a smirk.

When they had finished with breakfast, it was time for Margot to be introduced to Jack Crawford.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he said as they all sat down. “I’m told you have some valuable information for us.”

“Yes, I do,” Margot said.

—

Mason had his servants search the entire kingdom and surrounding areas, but there was no sign of Margot.

“What do you mean, she’s gone?” he asked. “She couldn’t have gone far, the weak little thing!”

“Your Majesty, we checked a few nearby inns, including Craber-“

“And?!” Mason demanded.

“It took some coaxing, but we were able to get information out of the little one,” the servant continued. “He said she was headed for Labinnac.”

“That wretched bitch!” Mason shouted. “Who does she think she is?”

“With all due respect, Your Majesty, you wanted her to leave,” another servant said quietly.

“But now she’s sleeping with the enemy!” Mason grumbled. “Add her to the list of people I want captured this spring. I am going to make her pay for all the pain she has caused me.”

Top Secret

Chapter Notes

So sorry I forgot to post this chapter on Wednesday. I've been really busy and tired lol

January arrived without a hitch, and so did a mysterious letter from Bedelia Du Maurier, addressed to Will..

Will was confused when he read the message and did not see Hannibal's name on there as well. In fact, it said not to tell Hannibal.

Will snuck out while Hannibal was meeting with his Council. He claimed he felt ill and needed fresh air. It was literally snowing outside, but he needed to excuse himself somehow.

Bedelia's table was much less intimidating than the one he and Hannibal sat at every day. She served Tart de Brymlent, a fish pie that consisted of haddock mixed with figs, apples, and raisins.

"Will anyone else be joining us?' Will asked.

"Any moment now," Bedelia said. "You're quite early."

As if she had manifested it, Freddie Lounds walked through the door.

"Sir Graham, what a lovely surprise," she said. "Here I was, thinking we were going to plan His Majesty's surprise without his companion. Silly me."

Will glared at her, still bitter about her lying to the jesters at the banquet months ago. Sure, the rumors ended up being true by the end of the night, but not when they were told.

"Oh, Graham," she sighed as she sat down at the table across from him. "You and your grudges."

"I'd actually like to thank you," Will said, only a little bit sarcastic. "For being the driving force behind us finally admitting we were madly in love with each other."

"Someone's a bit peevish today," Freddie said. "Did you not sleep well?"

Actually, ever since he had moved into Hannibal's room, he'd been getting better sleep than ever. But he couldn't tell that to Freddie. She would no doubt use it as ammunition.

"I slept fine," Will said. They both turned their heads as Alana Bloom walked through the door.

“Hello, Will,” she said, smiling as she took the seat next to him. “It’s nice to see you again. It’s been quite some time.”

Shortly after, Frederick Chilton joined them, sitting down next to Freddie. Then, Bedelia took her seat at the head of the table as everyone fixed themselves a plate.

“So, why exactly am I here?” Will asked.

“Lady Du Maurier didn’t tell you?” Chilton asked. “Sneaky girl…”

“His Majesty’s birthday is in two weeks,” Alana said. “Did he not tell you?”

“No,” Will said quietly. “Are we supposed to give him gifts? I don’t have anything.”

“Yes you do,” Chilton said. “Look down.”

Will didn’t need to look down to know what he meant. And he had a feeling his thoughts were plastered all over his face.

“You haven’t done it, have you?” Freddie asked. “What are you afraid of? You know he has feelings for you, and strong ones at that. If you feel the same, why not show it?”

Will reckoned he was turning redder than the skin of the apples in the pie.

“We are not doing this again,” Alana said. “I can’t sit here and listen to you two pester him like this.”

“Have you become friendly with the knight?” Bedelia asked.

“Yes, in fact, I have,” Alana said. “Look, all I’m trying to say is Will and Hannibal are their own people. You aren’t entitled to know anything about their love life.”

Alana gave Will a look that read don’t worry, I’ve got your back.

“It’s just curiosity,” Freddie said. “Aren’t you curious, Alana?”

Will really wanted to get out of here.

“Can we just plan the party?” he asked, slightly raising his voice. “I don’t have a lot of time. As far as Hannibal knows, I just stepped out to get some fresh air.”

“It is in our best interest to limit conversation to the topic at hand,” Bedelia said. “We have a lot of decisions to make and as Sir William said, he doesn’t have all day. If he’s gone too long, His Majesty will get suspicious.”

“He likely already is,” Will said. “I practically had to tell him I was coming down with the plague for him to let me leave the meeting.”

“Ooh, a meeting?” Chilton asked. “I’m always curious how things work around here.”

“I’m not telling you anything,” Will snapped. The room grew eerily quiet. “Uh, I mean, it’s kind of confidential. I can’t tell you anything. Now, can we just start planning this party?”

“Well, I supposed we should begin with the date,” Bedelia said. “His Majesty’s birthday is the twentieth, and I don’t believe he has any other obligations that day, so that should be fine. We will hold this celebration in the great hall. Sir William, we need you to distract him away from there until dinner time. Can you do that?”

“It will be difficult, but I’ll try my best,” Will said. “I can try to keep him in the gardens.”

“Perfect,” Bedelia said. “Now we need to discuss food. Sir William, could you have a word with the chefs to let them know we are having a feast?”

“Again, difficult,” WIll said. “But next time I’m alone, I’ll do that.”

“Perhaps the most difficult of all, you must find a way to get us into the castle,” Bedelia. “The guards will likely listen to you, so we need you to tell them we’ll be coming. Again, Hannibal cannot be present.”

“If I wake up early enough, I may be able to tell the morning shift guards to pass on the message,” Will said.

“Perfect,” Bedelia said. “Now for the responsibilities that do not fall on Sir William’s shoulders. Lady Alana, I would like for you to be in charge of decorations. Lord Frederick, I’m sure you have connections to some form of entertainment. And Lady Fredericka, your job is to spread the word amongst the king’s acquaintances.”

“If that’s all I need to know, I really must be getting back to the castle,” Will said. “I have no doubt that Hannibal is already suspicious.”

“Yes, you’re free to go,” Bedelia said. “Good luck.”

--

The meeting room was tense as the next topic was brought to the table: war.

“As you know, Mason Verger is alive,” Jack said. “With Margot’s testimony, we can confidently say he will seek revenge.”

“But he must wait until the spring,” Hannibal said. “This weather is not suitable for a full day’s travel. With an army, I imagine it would take longer.”

“Mason will be building his army bigger and better,” Jack said. “How many men do we have? I’m talking about knights and foot soldiers.”

“The most recent estimate was twelve thousand,” Hannibal said.

“Make sure every able-bodied man is armed,” Jack said. “Mason will most likely send a full blown invasion. No one will be safe, not even us.”

“We must ensure Margot’s safety beside our own,” Hannibal said.

“Of course,” Jack said. “She is one of ours now.”

--

When Will arrived at the castle, one of the guards stopped him.

“His Majesty has been looking for you,” he said. “He’s in the gardens.”

They let him through and he rushed to the gardens, where Hannibal was sitting on the bench. He wore a warm cloak. Will made his way over and joined him, shivering in the cold. It had begun to snow lightly.

“There you are,” Hannibal said. “Are you feeling better? Where were you?”

“I thought maybe a quick walk would help, but then I got lost,” Will said, a slight nervous tremble in his voice. “I do feel better, though.”

“Did you find yourself at Bedelia’s house?” Hannibal asked, pulling out the small paper invitation. Will’s eyes widened. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“The invitation said to come alone,” Will said.

“You could have at least told me where you were going,” Hannibal said. “What business do you have with Lady Du Maurier?”

Shit. Will had to think of something fast. He thought about all the possible reasons why Bedelia would invite him to sit with Alana, Freddie, and Chilton…

“At first she hadn’t told me why,” Will said. “But when I got there, Lady Alana, Lady Fredericka, and Lord Chilton were there as well. They said they wanted to apologize for what happened at the banquet.”

“It’s been quite some time,” Hannibal said. “Though, I suppose it’s never too late for an apology.”

There was a moment of tense silence as Will waited for Hannibal to say he knew he was lying, but that time never came. Instead, Hannibal simply wrapped the cloak around Will so they could both be warm.

“While you were gone, I spoke with Lord Jack Crawford,” Hannibal said. “We discussed Mason Verger. He agreed that it would be foolish of him to send his army in the cold. We must be prepared for the spring.”

“Hopefully more prepared than we were thirty years ago,” Will said, staring off into the distance. Suddenly, his eyes widened. He looked distraught.

“William, what has your mind revealed to you?” Hannibal asked.

“The invasion, when I was seven years old,” Will said. “It was Muskratville, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Hannibal. “But you mustn't dwell on it. Anger will only hinder your ability.”

“Then how am I supposed to feel?” Will asked.

“Determined,” Hannibal said. “To have justice for your mother, not to be confused with vengeance.”

As they talked, the snowfall thickened, growing a bit heavier than the flurry they began with. Hannibal stood, reaching out to help Will do the same.

“We should go inside,” Hannibal said. “You’re not dressed for the cold.”

They walked to the great hall where there was a large fireplace. It was already lit, as a few Council members had come to warm up. Hannibal pulled up two chairs and placed them together. He and Will sat down, Hannibal wrapping up Will once more.

Will couldn’t stop thinking about his supper with Bedelia and the others. He wasn’t sure how he was going to keep such a big secret. He had never lied to Hannibal like this before, and it seemed like he was already suspicious. He really hoped that he wouldn’t ask any questions.

“William, you were gone for a while,” Hannibal said. “Surely you had more conversations with the nobility.”

Will looked down at the floor, avoiding Hannibal’s gaze.

“Well, they asked a lot of questions about us,” Will said, only half-lying. “At first, Lord Frederick and Lady Fredericka were just talking about…well, you know. Thankfully Lady Alana shut that down pretty quickly.”

He heard Hannibal quietly laugh to himself.

“What were the questions that were so vile?” he asked, loving to watch Will squirm. He knew he was lying, but he was curious to see where this would lead.

“I- uh…” Will hesitated, cursing himself for putting himself in this situation. How was he supposed to see into the dirty minds of Freddie and Chilton? His blood ran cold when he realized that he may have to use his own.

“Was it too obscene to repeat?” Hannibal asked, almost in a teasing way. Will knew he was just trying to fluster him. He had to bite back.

“No, I just don’t want to spoil the surprise when it comes,” Will said. “Where’s the fun if you know every move the other person is going to make?”

“Well then, did you discuss anything else?” Hannibal asked, only a little thrown off. Will, on the other hand, was scrambling to find a lie that wouldn’t cause him as much distress.

“They wanted to hear some battle stories,” Will said, hoping this one would be easier.

“Are they the ones I have heard?” Hannibal asked.

“Some of them,” Will said. He pushed his hair back. “I told them how I got this scar. You remember that one.”

“Yes, I do,” Hannibal said.

“One that I haven’t told you is how I nearly died,” Will said, choosing to play it safe and tell a real, but sensational story.

“I’m intrigued,” Hannibal said.

“Some of the details are fuzzy, but it happened when I was just a squire,” Will said. “It’s actually the battle that earned me my knighthood. And the beginning of my very bad habit of running out with barely anything on me.”

“William, if you almost died, why did you continue doing that?” Hannibal asked.

“I’m the sacrificial lamb,” Will said. “Once I began putting my body on the line for the sake of others, I couldn’t stop.”

“All lambs must one day become sheep, and join the flock in self-preservation,” Hannibal said. “But please, continue with your story.”

“I was twenty-one, the perfect age to make terrible decisions,” Will began. “They came from the east, infiltrating the outer walls fairly quickly. I had helped my knight into his armor and insisted on myself wearing nothing, as we were running out of time before the enemies slaughtered everyone in that area of the town. He reluctantly let me come with him. Not very long after, he was knocked from his horse by a flail. Another held him down and pushed a blade through his visor. He died almost instantly.”

“And let me guess, you tried to avenge him,” Hannibal said with a sigh. “William, not only will your stubbornness kill you, but your righteous indignation will poke you to make sure you are dead.”

“I killed the man that did it,” Will said. “His chin strap was loose, so I was able to pull up his helmet and shove my dagger into his neck.”

“You were a very violent young man,” Hannibal said.

“What did you expect?” Will asked. “You saw me fight on day one.”

“I’ve also seen you timid and quiet,” Hannibal said. “When we first met at the table.”

Will had to admit, he had a point, but he wasn’t going to give him that victory.

“Anyway,” he continued, “As I stood up, I turned to see a man running at me with a spear. Before I could do anything about it, he jabbed me in the shoulder. I hit the ground, saw him stumble the other way - must’ve been hit by someone else - and felt myself being dragged away by another squire. I don’t remember much after that, if anything at all. I woke up in

some random woman's house, bandaged up. The other squire that had stayed with me said she was a healer. She said I was pale as a sheet when he brought me in. The wound was deep, so she stitched it before wrapping it in bandages. I was back on my feet the next day, as I was told I had earned my knighthood and my dubbing ceremony would be in a week. I wanted to look like I was in better shape than the reality."

"A habit you still hold today," Hannibal said. "You said it left a scar. Perhaps you can show me."

"I can if you want," Will said. "It's just like all the others."

"Each one is unique and tells its own story," Hannibal said. "We can wait until bedtime if you'd like."

"That's probably better than stripping out here," Will said with a slight laugh.

"Are you warm enough?" Hannibal asked, resting a hand on Will's knee. Will placed his over Hannibal's.

"Plenty," Will said.

They sat peacefully by the fire for nearly two hours until the curfew bell rang, which was usually their cue to start getting ready for bed.

When they got to the bedroom, Will removed his tunic to reveal his many scars. He pointed out the one from his story and Hannibal ran his fingers over it. It was small, but raised.

"Did it hurt?" Hannibal asked. "Or was your mind elsewhere?"

"I remember a burning pain brewing as I was dragged away," Will said, very aware of how close they were standing across from each other, Will with his back to the bed. "It worsened when I woke up, and if I dared to move."

"Do you believe your experiences in battle have shaped who you are today?" Hannibal asked, slowly running his hands down Will's arms.

"In a way, yes," Will said. "They didn't always change the way I fought. Sometimes it wasn't a mistake, but just bad luck. The others? I guess you could say the healing is what changed me. I've learned a lot."

"Like what?" Hannibal asked, take hold of his waist. Will laughed.

"What's with all the questions?" Will asked, placing his hands on Hannibal's shoulders. "Are you stalling? Just kiss me."

"You would like for me to kiss you?" Hannibal asked, pulling Will closer. Will nodded. "I'm afraid I can't."

"Why not?" Will asked, a confused look on his face.

“Because you’ve lied to me, William,” Hannibal said, his voice suddenly darker, his face more forbidding. He didn’t let go, however. In fact, he wrapped his arms around Will, holding him tight.

“What have I lied about?” Will asked. “That story is true. I literally have the scar to prove it.”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” Hannibal said, quieter now. He lowered it to a near whisper. “I will ask you one more time. What business do you have with Lady Du Maurier?”

Will swallowed a lump in his throat as Hannibal pulled away to look him in the eyes. What was he supposed to say? Hannibal could obviously tell when he was lying.

Perhaps he needed to tell the truth, or some version of it.

“I’m not allowed to tell you,” he said, apprehensive. He worried what might happen if he angered Hannibal in this way.

Hannibal sighed and broke away from their embrace.

“I’m hurt, William,” he said. “That you would keep secrets from me. I must be by myself. Please, sleep in your old room tonight.”

Will said nothing, but reluctantly got dressed and left the room.

His old room was much colder than Hannibal’s, and he had less cover. He had taken the wool blanket for granted, forgetting how he used to sleep only with a linen sheet.

It must have been midnight when he awoke to the sound of his door opening. He turned to see Hannibal standing there. For a moment, they said nothing. Then, Hannibal broke the silence.

“Could you come back to bed?” he asked, almost sheepishly.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!